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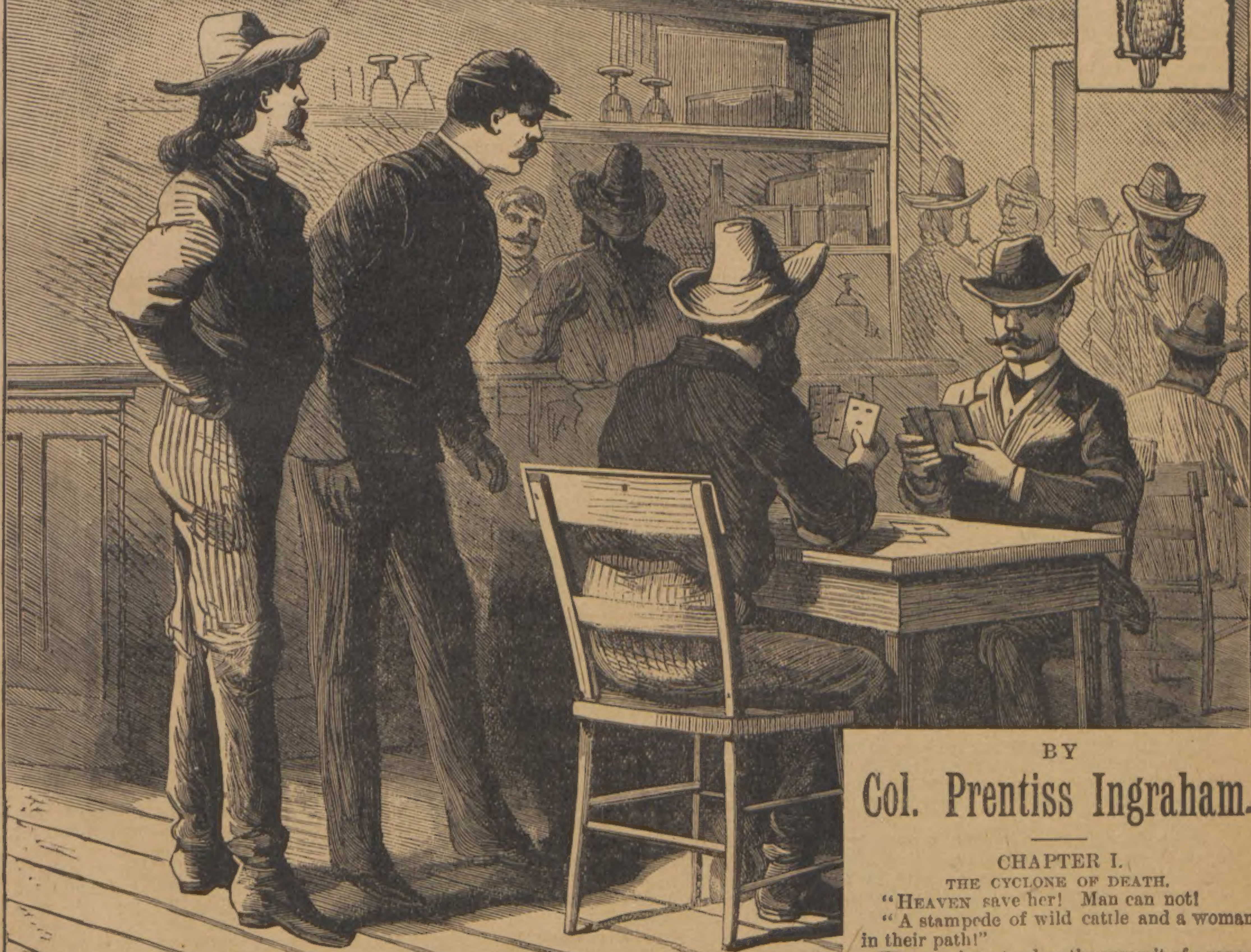
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BUFFALO BILL'S DEATH-CHARM



OR THE MAN WITH A SCAR

"THAT BETRAYS HIM; HE IS THE MAN,"

BY
Col. Prentiss Ingraham.

CHAPTER I.

THE CYCLONE OF DEATH.

"HEAVEN save her! Man can not!

"A stampede of wild cattle and a woman in their path!"

The speaker stood on the summit of a range of hills at the base of which began a prairie which stretched away mile after mile, looking with its carpet of green grass and undulations like a vast sea.

Behind the man a few paces stood his horse, a splendid animal, practically awaiting his master's will.

But upon the prairie?

A mile out from the base of the range, standing by the side of a fallen horse, was a woman.

Her hands were clasped before her, as she stood in an attitude of mute supplication, her eyes turned upon what seemed to her certain death—a death of horror and agony, for, rushing upon her with terrific speed was a mighty herd of cattle, of wild-eyed, long-horned Texas steers in a mad stampede.

There were thousands in that wild race; they stretched in one long, heaving, rushing line, looking like a limitless tidal wave rushing on to break against the hills.

Surging, bellowing, plunging, the thunder of their hoofs echoing back from the hills, the cracking of their horns striking together, rattling like volleys of rifle shots, the frightened brutes came on, the line reaching for over a mile on either side of the girl as she stood there in their direct path, certainly doomed to death, for the one on the range had said:

"Man cannot save her."

All this he had seen at a glance, as he dismounted from his horse and looked out over the great range.

A moment of awful suspense to him; then, like a bell's clear notes rang the words:

"I will risk it!"

"She must not die if there is one chance in a million to save her!"

"I will take my chances!"

With a bound he had reached his horse, the heavy saddle and trappings were thrown off; his rifle and belt of arms followed; then, leaping upon the now bare-back animal, he rode down the slope at breakneck speed.

The noble horse seemed to realize all that was expected of him, and with great bounds went down the hill at a terrible risk of falling.

But the daring rider held him well in hand; the prairie was reached without a stumble, and, with the rowels pressed hard against his flanks, he was driven to his utmost speed in the race for life or death.

The girl saw him coming, and turned her eyes upon the wild herd to measure the distance between herself and the mad cattle and herself and the daring man now attempting her rescue.

The rushing herd was the nearer to her. She noted the speed of the steers, and took in the pace at which the horse was coming.

At first it seemed that the cattle were nearing her at the greater speed, but she considered that it was their vast number, the striking of their horns, their bellowing and the thunder of their hoofs that made them appear to run the faster.

Yes, the horse was coming at a fleet pace than the cattle.

Again her hands rose in mute supplication, her eyes looked longingly, pleadingly, upon the dauntless man who was rushing into the most desperate danger to rescue her.

Thus she stood while the relentless wave of death drew nearer and nearer, and the straw of hope—a feather, it seemed, battling against a hurricane—also drew closer and closer.

She closed her eyes in mute hope and despair mingled, and thus awaited life or death.

The roar of the animal cyclone grew louder and louder; it seemed as if they were almost upon her, and she felt her knees growing weak with terror beneath her weight.

Suddenly, when she dared not open her eyes, there came to her a voice that was sweeter than a siren's song—a loud, manly, commanding voice, that said:

"Stand ready! I will grasp you as I wheel around you!"

She opened her eyes, to behold her bold rescuer right upon her.

But, so were the maddened steers!

Another instant and the panting, splendid horse was reined back upon his haunches, an arm grasped her firmly and dragged her up from the ground, and, in the same precious moment of time, the animal was wheeled, as though on a

pivot, and sent bounding back toward the hills, not fifty feet intervening between that wild cyclone of death and the now doubly burdened steed.

CHAPTER II.

"I KNOW YOU ARE BUFFALO BILL."

The woman had been snatched from certain death in the one second of time, but was not by any means wholly sure of life.

Nor was her rescuer. His horse was a splendid animal of remarkable speed and endurance, but he had been driven to a terrible burst of speed, that had overstrained every nerve, muscle and tendon, and now, with two riders upon his back, he had the race back to the hills, with death crowding close upon his heels.

Could his strength keep him ahead of that deadly, on-rushing wave?

Could his endurance hold, at that straining pace, until the goal of safety in the hills was reached?

That was the question his firm-hearted rider was considering.

He held the slender form of the woman he had snatched from the ground close before him, and clasped the reins with the other hand, to steady his hard-laboring horse.

He had never before had to spur his noble beast; the willing and well-trained animal did not need such urging; but he did so now, and, as the spurs raked the flanks he would say, as though asking pardon for the act:

"It must be, old fellow! On, on, for death is close upon you."

Not a word did he speak to the one he had saved.

Not a word did she speak to him, only once muttering, in pathetic tones:

"Poor, poor horse!"

Thus they strode on, and the hills at length loomed up close ahead, but the wild herd was close behind!

A glance over his shoulder at last, and the man said, firmly:

"We will make it!"

The steed had gained several rods on the herd. Stretched out at his fullest length, his nostrils red and palpitating, his eyes wild with the exertion, his whole hide as wet as though drenched with water, the noble creature was doing his utmost.

Nearer and nearer to the ridge the animal drew, and his rider began to pick out a place of shelter into which to dash.

There was, a few hundred feet up the slope, a group of rocks, in which grew half a dozen stunted trees. Once behind this shelter and they would be safe.

At last the slope was reached and the horse began the terrible climb, in great bounds, as if he fully realized the peril.

Another moment and the animal was wheeled behind the barrier, the man sprang to the ground, leaped upon the rocks, and, waving his broad sombrero with one hand, he began to fire a revolver with the other, and to shout loudly.

A few seconds of suspense and the herd was tearing up the slope.

But the hills had been reached; the steers had run for long miles, and the breaks here and there of rocks, bushes and trees, with the added climb up the hill, caused the herd to almost at once slacken speed, and scatter into bands; the stampede was over.

"That was the closest call of my life," and the man seemed rather to speak to himself than to his companion.

She stood by the head of the noble horse, her hands caressing him.

The animal's head was hung low, his sides heaved like a bellows, and the sweat poured from his hide like rain. He was panting like a hound and trembling with nervous excitement.

At the words of her rescuer the woman turned her gaze upon him.

Standing upon the rock, silent, and gazing out over the prairie, he looked for the instant like a magnificent piece of statuary.

Over six feet in height, of a slender yet powerful build, dressed in a cavalry fatigue jacket, top boots, buckskin leggings, a negligé silk shirt, and a som-

brero, gray in hue, and encircled by a silver cord, while his long, dark hair hung upon his shoulders, the man was a most picturesque personage.

His face, too, was a striking one, revealing in its expression the pluck and indomitable will to perform just such a deed as he had risked his life to do.

Lost in meditation for the moment, he turned suddenly toward the one he had rescued, as though just then realizing that he was not alone.

He beheld a very slender, graceful form, clad in a dark blue velvet riding habit, trimmed with gold braid and buttons.

Upon her head was a Mexican sombrero, beautifully embroidered in gold, and encircled by a band of gold coin.

There was a belt about her well-molded waist of links of gold, and in an embroidered scabbard and holster were a knife and a revolver.

If the costume of the woman was striking, her face was more so.

Her hair, now loosened from its coil, hung about her to her knees, and was as black as the plume in her sombrero.

Her eyes were large, sable in hue, rendered dreamy by the longest of lashes, and every feature was in keeping and perfectly carved, as from marble, it seemed, for her face was still white from her dread of a terrible death.

As the man turned he met her splendid eyes fixed full upon him, and she said, in an affirmative, rather than a questioning, tone:

"I know that you are Buffalo Bill."

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN OF MYSTERY.

Young, beautiful, richly dressed and there in that wilderness alone, the woman impressed the rescuer strangely.

Who she was he did not know, could not guess, unless she lived at one of the very few and far-scattered ranches in that part of the country in Southern New Mexico.

How it was that she knew him, for he was Buffalo Bill, the noted scout, was another mystery he could not solve, for never before had he set eyes on her that he could recall, and such a face as she possessed was one not to forget, having once been seen.

At her words he raised his hat with graceful courtesy, and replied:

"Yes, I am called Buffalo Bill, but you have the advantage of me."

"A woman is entitled to hold the advantage of a man, I believe," she responded, with a smile, and then added:

"Your real name is William F. Cody, and you are Chief of Scouts in the Army on the Northern Plains, but have been ordered to this part of the country on special service, with your headquarters at Fort Taos."

"You appear to know it all," responded the scout, with a smile, and continuing:

"I am seeking information as to whom I have the honor of meeting, and why I find her alone on these plains?"

"First, let me try to tell you how deep my gratitude to you is for your service to me, for, but for you I would now be trampled out of all human shape, lying on that prairie."

"You risked your life to save me, a stranger to you, and nobly did you do it, you and your grand horse—you are a well-matched pair, senor."

The scout bowed, and replied:

"I am most happy to have served you, miss, and I feel that my horse would so express himself could he speak."

"But, may I ask what I can now do to restore you to your home, or friends?"

The scout felt that the mystery was deepening, for there had not yet been any mention of her name, of where her home was or why she was there alone upon the prairie.

Forced to make a more direct reply to his last question, she hesitated a moment before doing so, and then said:

"Down this range, a mile, there dwells an old hunter, who has several horses."

"At present he is not at home, for I saw him going northward early this

morning; but his horses are there in corral, and if you will be good enough to ride there for me and fetch me one of the horses, I will feel that I am under a still greater debt of gratitude to you."

Buffalo Bill could do no more than obey, and so replied:

"I know the cabin, for I passed it on my way up the range."

"I will leave my horse in your keeping and go on foot."

She simply bowed, and Buffalo Bill turned and walked rapidly up the ridge to the summit.

There lay his saddle, trappings, rifle and belt of arms just where he had thrown them, and, taking up the weapons, he continued on his way.

It was hardly a mile to the little cabin, which he had seen hidden away in a canyon, and, reaching there, he found several good horses in a small corral.

Selecting one from the lot, he made a bridle of the stake rope and, leaping upon his back, returned at a gallop to the spot where he had left his fair but mysterious companion.

She was quietly awaiting him, and was feeding his horse with handfuls of grass she had cut for him with her knife.

"Your horse is all right, I am glad to see, senior, but what trouble I am giving you, and it is not yet over, for I am going to ask you to go out on the prairie with me and see if my saddle and bridle have been made a complete wreck."

"Certainly; I intended doing so, and stopped for my saddle as I came along."

"Allow me to aid you."

He placed her lightly in his saddle, gave her the reins, and, throwing himself upon his own horse, led the way out upon the prairie.

The earth, cut up in ridges, showed how quickly the sharp hoofs of the cattle would have torn the life from any human being in their path.

As they drew near the spot they saw that several dead steers were piled about the dead horse.

In their blind flight they had not seen the animal, had fallen upon him, and others piling up from behind them had quickly covered the horse with their bodies, while life had been trampled out of them by the thousands of hoofs coming on.

Fortunately the bodies of the steers had served as a shield for the horse, and when Buffalo Bill, with an effort of his great strength, had dragged the animals off, it was seen that the saddle and bridle were not very much damaged.

They were both of costly manufacture, of Mexican pattern, and Buffalo Bill soon had them on the horse he had taken from the old hunter's corral.

As he tightened the cinch the eyes of the scout fell upon the skirt of the saddle in which there was a small round hole, and all about it stained with blood.

"Why, this is a bullet hole."

"It was this that killed your horse," he said, with surprise.

"Yes; I was fired upon from ambush, but urged my horse in flight, and he carried me this far before he fell."

"Then I saw the stampede of cattle, and gave myself up for lost, when you came so daringly to my rescue. But here our paths divide, perhaps never to meet again, and so I would have you do one thing for me—will you?"

"I cannot refuse, thus asked, but you will certainly allow me to see you to your home, or to a place of safety?"

"No, no. That cannot be. We part here, and, as you have promised to obey my will, you must wear this—see?"

She had quickly taken from her collar, as she spoke, a unique pin, and at once pinned it upon the scout's breast, upon the left side.

"Wear it there, where it can be seen. Let me tell you it is a Death Charm, and will save your life as it has mine."

"Wear it at all times, senior, for you will not break your word."

"Now, good-by, and Heaven bless you!"

She wheeled suddenly, leaped into her saddle, and was off like an arrow from a bow, leaving Buffalo Bill standing in

mute amazement, gazing after her as she sped across the prairie which stretched out in boundless expanse before her.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEATH CHARM.

Buffalo Bill, in a quandary, stood like one who had received a rude shock.

Night was coming on, for the sun was touching the top of the range behind him and soon the prairie would be cast in gloom.

But there, leaving the hill-land behind her, that strange woman was forcing her horse straight out upon the trackless prairie.

She had shown that they must part then and there, and so he could not follow her against her wish and will.

"I never was in such a quandary in my life," he at last found words to utter.

"Who is she and what does all this mystery mean?"

"Where is she from, where is she going?"

"That bullet in her saddle skirt, and her horse lying dead here, killed by the shot, beyond doubt, yet which she calmly told me was a shot from ambush."

"Ah! I had forgotten what she was pleased to call a Death Charm," and the scout glanced down at the pin, which she had fastened upon his left breast.

He was fairly startled as he saw it, for he had not noticed it before, and a glance showed him its great value.

It was a human hand, made of rubies, with a setting of gold, holding in the palm a miniature skull of pearls.

Tiny gold chains suspended this strange device from the pin, which was an owl of diamonds with large, brilliant eyes of opals.

Looking at this unique, weird and most valuable gift, Buffalo Bill said:

"No, no; I cannot accept this most remarkable trinket, Death Charm or whatever she may call it."

"It is some costly thing she must value highly, and gave it to me to show her appreciation of what I did for her, to reward me for her life."

"Come, old horse, I will have to force you to another run, for she shall take this Death Charm back again, if my death follows to-night for refusing it—ah! She has disappeared."

He scanned the prairie closely, but could not see her.

He took the field-glass that hung at his belt and ran his eyes over the green plain, but nowhere was horse or rider visible; they had disappeared as completely as though swallowed up by the earth.

The rays of the setting sun made the prairie almost as bright as noon-day, but the horse and his fair rider were as if they had never been.

"There is some break in the plain which she knew of and has taken, to throw me off her track."

"I can do nothing to-night, so will go to the little stream over on the range and camp, and to-morrow see what I can discover."

"Come, old pard, you will be glad of a good night's rest, I know," and, patting his horse affectionately, Buffalo Bill mounted and rode back toward the range, now and then casting a glance behind him, hoping that he might catch a glimpse of the mysterious woman again.

"She's Mexican, no doubt of that, for she spoke with a slight accent, and she's as pretty as a basket of kittens; but who in the name of New Mexico can she be—who and what is she?"

"I give it up, and I'm not going crazy trying to guess, but will wait, for all things come to those who wait, it is said."

The scout rode at a canter back toward the range. He was anxious to get into camp before it grew wholly dark, and recalled a spot he had seen on a little stream, where he could be most comfortable, with plenty of grass, wood and water at hand.

Buffalo Bill was not forgetful that he was in a perilous country, for the Apaches were to the north, the Comanches south, and the ranches that lay to

the eastward and along the trail of wagon-trains, stage travel and the cattle-herding lands, caused a lawless element to infest the mountains, from which they would at times pounce upon the traveler, the ranch, stage coach or attack an emigrant party.

Fort Taos was the check to this lawlessness, as much as was practicable, and a menace to the hostile Indians, as well; but, for all that, the outlaws would strike severe blows from time to time, and the redskins would go upon the warpath to kill and destroy.

It was mainly to put down this lawlessness of Mexican desperadoes, to ferret out their hiding places and bring them to punishment that Buffalo Bill had been ordered to Fort Taos a few weeks before the opening of this story.

Colonel Hadaway, an old commander in the Northwest, where Buffalo Bill had served as his chief of scouts, had quickly made a demand for him in the new field he had been ordered to when he discovered that the outlaws could not be driven out.

"I want every outlaw in this region killed, captured or hanged, Cody," was his significant announcement. "The task is a big one, the danger is terrible, the work hard, but you can do it, and that is why I sent for you."

"There is a large gang of them, under a leader known as El Cobra, the Snake. They call him Captain Cobra, and the band takes his name, being known as El Cobras."

"Every scout is at your command, and if you need the whole garrison in your work, call on me and they are ready."

Such had been Colonel Hadaway's words to Buffalo Bill upon his reaching Fort Taos, and the scout had at once begun his work.

With this explanation of Buffalo Bill's presence down in New Mexico, let us follow him on his ride back to the range to go into camp for the night.

He approached the slope just as it was twilight and allowed his horse to walk slowly up the rise.

Reaching the summit he turned and glanced back over the prairie, but now all was darkness there.

Continuing on his way, he had ridden about half a mile when, suddenly, on each side of him, and over him, he heard a sound he knew but too well.

It was the whirring of lassoes in their flight.

Quickly he sought to wheel his horse in flight, but was too late, for several coils settled over his head, and as many more over his horse.

He was fairly caught, and resistance was useless.

CHAPTER V.

FACING DEATH.

With arms pinioned to his sides, his horse securely caught also in the coils, Buffalo Bill was utterly helpless.

The camp he had sought was just ahead of him, and with no dread of danger he was soon expecting to enjoy a good supper and night's rest, after the thrilling adventure of the afternoon.

He was passing through a group of bowlders, shaded by trees, when he was caught; it was the very spot for lurking foes to hide in.

His horse had reared, to break away, but, like his master, he at once recognized his helplessness and remained quiet.

Buffalo Bill saw about him a crowd of men, whose number he quickly counted. There were nine.

They were of small stature, as he could see in the darkness; they were, apparently, in Mexican costume, and wore large sombreros with stiff brims and peaked tops.

Speaking a little Spanish, Buffalo Bill did not intend to give the fact away, so asked in English:

"Well, boys, now you've got me, what are you going to do with me?"

"Hang you!" was the quick retort of one who appeared to be the leader, and he spoke with a decided accent.

"That is bad for me, and I do not see that it will do you much good."

"How have I wronged you?"

"You haf' been Boofala Beel."

"Yes, and am Buffalo Bill yet."

"We hang you verra high up."

"If I am to be hanged I don't mind how high you hoist me, but who are you that appoint yourselves my judge and my executioners?" and Buffalo Bill was watching every chance for an escape.

Could he only get one of his revolvers in each hand it would surprise those fellows to see how he could shoot.

"We Mexican—hate Gringos—we El Cobras!"

"Oh! I have heard of you—a pretty bad lot—and from all reports I guess it's all up with me."

"Yes. Come, now, quick, and be hang."

"Don't hurry yourselves, for I'm not at all impatient," and the scout was working hard to get his hands upon the hilts of his guns.

But the band had their lariats adjusted now; the horse was in lead, and two of the men quickly unbuckled the scout's belt and disarmed him, taking his rifle from where it hung on his saddle horn, also.

But Buffalo Bill still had another revolver, worn in a pocket of his fatigue jacket, so he did not yet despair.

Some of the men had gone on directly to the camp ground the scout had intended to make his stop, and a fire burst into blaze.

Toward this fire the scout's horse was led, and reaching there, he was ordered to dismount.

The three lassoes coiled about his body rendered resistance vain, and he could only obey.

The firelight revealed two horses of the men, staked out near, and toward them his animal was led.

Watching like a hawk every movement of the El Cobras, Buffalo Bill only wanted the slightest chance to make a break for freedom.

The light revealed to him that there was no mistaking who his captors were.

They were Mexicans, and as hard looking a lot as he had ever seen.

Their dress was a striking and gruesome one, for it represented the skin of a snake, while about their sombreros was coiled a stuffed viper skin.

They were armed with revolver and long knife in each belt, a short carbine hanging at their backs and a long lance, in imitation of Mexican cavalry, while in addition each man of them carried a long lariat.

"Now come; we hang you," said the leader.

"What for?" asked the scout, still trying to gain time, and having already determined upon his course of action.

It was better to die by bullet than by rope, he thought, and his intention was to whip a revolver from the belt of the leader and with that and his own weapon to dash right upon them and shoot to kill.

In answer to his last question the leader said:

"One my men see you steal mustang from poor old man—you horse thief."

"And you are a liar. I took that horse at the request of a lady who knew the hunter, and she said she would be responsible to him."

"What lady?"

"A lady dressed in blue velvet—I do not know her name, but her horse was killed; she was in the path of a herd of several thousand stampeded cattle, and I saved her from death, and got the horse for her from the hunter's corral."

"Where senorita now?"

"She left me on the prairie and I came here to camp, when you coyotes jumped me."

Buffalo Bill saw that his words had made an impression.

The men talked in a low and rapid tone among themselves, and from what he had before caught of what they had said he was sure they meant to carry out their threat and hang him.

After an earnest talk with the others,

the leader again turned to Buffalo Bill and said:

"Maybe so you tell us true about senorita—maybe so not; but we hang you just like dog!"

He had placed his hand to uncoil the lariats about the scout's body, when, suddenly, his eyes fell upon the Death Charm on his prisoner's breast as the firelight flashed full upon it.

Instantly he uttered a cry, called his comrades, and all stood gazing full at the strange trinket with amazement depicted upon every face.

CHAPTER VI.

PUT TO THE TEST.

It did not take Buffalo Bill long to discover that the eyes of the outlaws were riveted upon the pin he wore.

"They'll swear I stole it, I suppose, and kill me to get it."

"But, they won't all enjoy it, for now is my time to act," he muttered.

They would, he felt sure, uncoil the lassoes about him to bind his hands behind him, and also to tie his feet, preparatory to hanging him, not supposing that he would resist so many of them.

Confident of this, the scout was preparing to act the moment the last lasso was uncoiled from about his body.

But the work had suddenly stopped when the leader had espied the pin.

They glared at it and at the scout, and spoke a few words rapidly among themselves, which their prisoner could not catch.

Then the leader spoke sternly and asked:

"Where did you get that?"

"It was given to me by the lady I saved from the stampeding herd of steers."

"Who was the lady?"

"I do not know; but I think she was a Mexican, from one of the ranches. She did not give me her name, though I asked her."

"Why did she not fly from the cattle?"

"She did; but her horse was wounded; she said she had been fired upon by some one in ambush, and she fled."

"The steers came over a rise and she had to run before them until her horse fell."

"I saw her danger, rode to her aid, brought her here, and she told me where to get a horse."

"I did so, went with her to where her pony lay dead, put her saddle and bridle on the horse I had gotten, and then, pinning this pin on my breast, she left me."

"That is all I can tell you."

"Why did she place it there?"

"I suppose to reward me; but I did not notice its value until after she had gone."

"What did she call it?"

"A Death Charm, and said it would protect me, but of course I took no stock in that."

"Can you guide us to where that dead horse lies?"

"Yes; but what is the use?"

"Can you direct two of my men, while you remain here?"

"Of course I can."

"Tell them."

Buffalo Bill gave the desired direction, but suggested, as it was a dark night, it would be best to send four men, so they could stretch out in a longer line.

He had a motive in this, as, if they did not rebind him, he knew he could work his arms loose, and then his guards would have a picnic.

But the leader compromised upon three men, and took the precaution to more securely bind the prisoner before he divided his forces.

As Buffalo Bill was not yet able to resist, he had to submit, and did so.

Then the outlaws set about cooking supper, and the scout was glad to see that it was going to be a good one, for he was hungry.

The three men had gone off at a gallop, and there was nothing for him to do but await their return.

An hour later they were back again; the leader was called to one side, and,

after a few minutes' conversation, he approached Buffalo Bill and said, with considerable respect in his voice and bearing:

"Senor, you are right; you did save a senorita from death, for my men report the horse there, and several dead cattle about it; they also report cattle ranging back over the prairie."

"As you have not got the horse you were seen to take from the corral, all must be as you say, and you are free."

Buffalo Bill found it hard to believe what he heard, and, with a sudden impulse, he said:

"Well, I guess it is the Death Charm that saves me."

"Yes, senor, the Death Charm saves you."

"Who is the lady that gave it to me?"

"I do not know, senor."

"Why do you respect it, then?"

"My race are superstitious, senor, and when one wears a Death Charm we respect it; we dare not harm him; and for that reason I sent to see if the dead horse was there, to know that all you said was true."

"I have found it to be so; therefore you are free to go your way, senor, but beware that you strike not at the life of any of the band of El Cobras, or the Death Charm will lose its power."

"I'll chance it," muttered Buffalo Bill to himself, and he also mused:

"That fellow was lying to me, for he does know who gave me the pin and dares not touch it or harm me."

After talking with his men, the leader asked Buffalo Bill to share their supper, and added that they would then leave him to enjoy his camp alone, as they were going on a night trail.

Buffalo Bill knew that they had arranged to camp there all night, after hanging him, but he made no comment upon their change of plans, accepted the invitation to supper, and afterward saw them mount and ride away, each one giving him a respectful salute, and the leader saying:

"Good-by, senor, but remember, let El Cobras alone if you wish to live."

"I'll remember," replied the scout, and he added, as they disappeared in the darkness:

"Now, the Death Charm has been put to the test and won. What does it mean?"

"Those fellows know, and it is for me to find out, as I surely will."

CHAPTER VII.

THE MIDNIGHT ASSASSIN.

Buffalo Bill was watchful in spite of having been set free by the outlaws. One of them might do what the whole band had refused to do; so he placed his horse close in under the shadow of the trees, and, having had his supper, built up the fire and then arranged his saddle, overcoat and trappings to look like a man's form lying down.

Taking another blanket, he went some distance from the fire and lay down to sleep.

If any one came he knew that he would awaken, for his long training on the frontier in deadly danger had cultivated in him an instinct equal almost to that of a dog to discover a foe.

He soon sank to sleep, and several hours thus passed, when he was aroused by a snort from his horse.

The animal was as good as a watchdog, he well knew, and in an instant he was wide awake and on the alert. He realized that some danger threatened or he would never have been warned by his horse.

All was dark about him, but he had piled so much wood upon the fire that it was burning fairly well, and cast a light around for forty or fifty feet.

Under the shadow of a pine near the fire lay what he had made to represent his sleeping form, and he could see it distinctly.

The horse was in the shadow of the trees, but the scout could hear him walking around his stake rope uneasily.

Some one was about, that was certain; but Buffalo Bill was on his guard and that meant half the battle.

Suddenly, out of the darkness burst a red flame; a sharp report followed, and Buffalo Bill heard the dull thud as the bullet struck the make-believe man lying near the fire.

It had struck in such a way that it must have knocked the bridle in a heap, as there was a movement of the blanket after the bullet had hit.

The horse pulled hard at his stake-rope and neighed wildly, but Buffalo Bill did not move from his position. He was biding his time.

Then came another flash and report, this time nearer than from where the first shot had been fired, and there was the same dull thud as before.

The assassin intended to make sure of his victim; there should be no struggle with Buffalo Bill!

A silence followed the second shot, broken only by the frantic efforts of the horse to break away.

The form by the fire naturally lay as still as death, but the scout remained in his hiding place equally as still.

Suddenly a man dashed out of the shadow of the woods right into the glare of the firelight. He ran across the circle of light, his knife in one hand, revolver in the other, and with a savage Mexican execration threw himself down upon the supposed form of the scout, his knife giving a vicious blow as he did so.

Then the scout spoke:

"Here I am, Greaser! Up with your hands, Mexico!"

There was a yell of terror, as the Mexican sprang to his feet, and, though not seeing the scout, he pulled trigger at random in the direction from whence had come the voice, while at the same time he bounded for the nearest cover.

But the scout's revolver spoke then, and once only.

It was enough.

The man fell heavily, rolled over and lay groaning and muttering Mexican prayers.

The scout knew that he had wounded him, but did not know how severely.

He must match cunning with cunning, so he flanked around, and approached him from behind, his revolver in hand.

A word to his horse, a joyous neigh, as the animal saw him, and the intelligent creature was no longer restive.

"Senor or padre, for the love of the Virgin!" cried the man as he heard the voice of the scout.

"Now you've got me, for I could get anything else quicker than a priest for you," said Buffalo Bill, not unkindly.

"You have killed me," groaned the man.

"That is what I shot to do, and I am only sorry it was not sudden death, for it is bad enough to have to take human life without having to see you die."

"Senor, I cannot die without a priest."

"I don't see what I can do to help you. Let me see your wound, and if it is not as severe as you think, I will bear you to the old hunter's cabin, and ride to the Mission, fifty miles from here, for a priest."

"It will do no good; I am going fast," groaned the man.

"Why did you seek to kill me?"

"For that Death Charm you wear."

"Twice it has saved you. I wanted it, and your life, for I hated you."

"I had done you no harm."

"You wore that bauble; that was enough; and she—"

"Who?"

"No one."

"You know the woman that gave it to me?"

The man was silent.

"You spared my life to-night, when here, with your men, because I wore the Death Charm, and then came back alone to kill me and get possession of it."

"Tell me—why did you do this?"

There was no reply, and when the scout bent over to look close at the man, he cried:

"He is dead!"

CHAPTER VIII. THE OLD HUNTER.

Without a movement or a groan the thread of life had snapped in twain and the Mexican bandit was dead.

Buffalo Bill threw some wood upon the fire and by its light saw that the man was above his fellows in appearance, having been evidently from the higher walks of life.

He was tall, for one of his race, well formed, and had a dark, handsome, but evil face, with long hair, a heavy mustache and imperial.

He was better dressed, too, and the snake about his sombrero had diamond eyes and a large opal in the center of the head.

Upon the small finger of the left hand the El Cobra wore a large ring, with a blood-red seal, in which was a snake formed of diamonds.

This Buffalo Bill took from the finger, along with a belt of gold which the man wore about his waist.

He also took from him his jacket, leggings, sombrero and weapons, and made them into a bundle.

He had no more desire to sleep, and did not know but that still another of the band might return upon the same errand, so he was anxious to get away.

Going in search of the Mexican's horse, he found him a few hundred yards away, standing in the stream, hitched there.

"Ah! He did not wish to be trailed here, so came up the bed of the water-course, so I'll not give it away that he met with an accident," decided Buffalo Bill, and he left the horse where he was, but took from the saddle one of the serapes upon it.

Returning to his camp he removed from his traps a hatchet, and, gathering some wood, went over to the stream near by; then, taking off his boots and socks, and rolling up his pants above his knees, he set to work and soon had a dam that carried the stream away from its bed.

Here he began work with his hatchet, and, after a couple of hours' work, had hollowed out a grave in the soft earth.

Into this the body of the Mexican, wrapped in his serape, was placed; the grave was filled in hard, the dam removed, and the water flowed on as before.

Gliding over the grave, carrying off all the loose dirt, the stream soon hid all trace that a human form lay beneath its limpid waters.

This done, Buffalo Bill packed the traps of the dead Mexican, and, taking from his saddle bags a small hammer, some nails, a knife, file and some horseshoes, he returned to the stream where the animal still stood.

A fire was built for light, and, leading the horse out of the stream, upon a serape, Buffalo Bill set to work, and in half an hour had shod the animal all round, roughly, but well.

Then he hitched him again in the stream, put the Mexican's traps on the saddle, and, going back to his camp, soon had his own horse saddled and bridled.

It was dawn, now, and he was glad to see that there was no trace of the tragedy enacted there.

Riding away from the camp he soon after reached the trail leading down the ridge toward the old hunter's cabin.

The cabin was situated at the head of a deep canyon, overhung by lofty cliffs, and the spray from a torrent tumbling from the heights above almost reached the hermit's door.

There was a rich bit of meadow-land below the cabin, and a rude barrier of logs and rocks, serving as a fence, was across the canyon at its narrowest part, forming a corral for his horses.

The cabin, built of stone, was as strong as a fort. It had a window, and a door of logs, split in two, and thick enough to arrest and hold a bullet.

Smoke curling up from the chimney told the scout that the old hunter had returned home, and so he hailed as he entered the barrier and neared the cabin.

At once the hunter appeared in the

door, rifle in hand, and thus stood as Buffalo Bill approached.

As he drew near the scout saw a man of fifty, with long, iron gray hair and beard, buckskin leggings, shirt and moccasins, a squirrel-skin cap, belt of arms and a rifle.

The face was the hue of leather, and the eyes deep-set, very bright and piercing.

He did not speak, but waited for the scout to do so, still standing upon his guard.

"Good morning, old gentleman," saluted Buffalo Bill, politely, while he eyed him with curiosity.

"Mornin', pard!"

"I called on you yesterday, when you were not at home, and borrowed one of your horses, so I came to tell you about it."

"I know."

"Who told you?" and the scout wondered how much the old hunter did know.

"She," was the laconic reply.

"Whom do you mean?"

"The one who got the horse."

"You have seen her then?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Where?"

"Met her on the trail."

"She told you that I had taken her horse?"

"For her, yes."

"Who did she tell you I was?"

"One they call Buffalo Bill."

"Did she tell you why I took your horse?"

"Yes; her's was dead."

"Tell you anything else?"

"Said she would send my horse back to me."

"Who is she?"

"Don't know."

CHAPTER IX.

BUFFALO BILL BAFFLED.

Buffalo Bill looked at the old man in a way which very plainly showed he believed the hunter was lying in saying that he did not know who the strange woman was, but he played off.

"You say you do not know who she was?"

"Don't know!"

"Why, she told me she knew you and sent me to your cabin here to get that horse for her, saying she would make it all right with you."

"So she will."

"Yet you do not know her?"

"No."

"And she knows you."

"Everybody knows Panther Pete."

"That is your name?"

"Yes."

"You live here all alone?"

"Yes."

"What do you do?"

"Kill panthers, mostly."

"And hunt?"

"Yes."

"For Indians and outlaws?"

"If they hunt me."

"You sell panther skins and pelts?"

"Yes; trap for pelts and sell them; get big money for panther skins with head and claws on."

"Do the Comanches never bother you?"

"Sometimes."

"What do you do then?"

The hunter did not reply by words, but pointed silently to a little spot on the banks of the stream, where the scout counted no fewer than seven graves.

"Ah! You kill, scalp and bury your dead?"

"Yes."

"Do you see the outlaws often?"

"Sometimes."

"And they do not disturb you?"

"Twice; their graves are yonder, more than you see from here."

"I see them when they do not see me."

"I see, and get the drop on them first?"

"Yes."

"You have lived here for some time?"

"Ten years."

"Do you ever go over among the ranches?"

"Only to the store to sell my pelts and get my supplies."

"Then you know some of the ranch people?"

"No."

"Not even the Lady in Velvet?"

"No."

"How does she know you, then?"

"Everybody knows me."

Buffalo Bill smiled.

He had gotten back to the same answer again.

But he tried again.

"You have seen the lady before?"

"Several times. Seen her riding in the mountains."

"Alone?"

"Sometimes."

"Who was with her when she was not alone?"

"Other people."

"Did you ever see this before?" and the scout pointed to the Death Charm.

"No."

"It was given me by that lady in blue for saving her life."

"She told me—that was all."

"Do you ever go to the fort?"

"No."

"Does no one know you there?"

"Everybody knows Panther Pete."

The scout bit his lip to hid a smile, and muttered to himself:

"And Panther Pete is a sly old coyote."

But aloud he said:

"Do you know anybody at the fort?"

"Have seen them—that's all."

"Well, pard, I expect to be scouting around this country now and then, and may see you often, so we must be good friends."

"Yes."

"I camped on the range last night, and a band of outlaws captured me, but when they saw this badge I wear they let me go."

The old hunter made no reply, and Buffalo Bill asked:

"Do you know those outlaws? El Cobras, as they call themselves?"

"Yes; bad men."

"Do you know their haunts?"

"No."

"Did you ever see their chief?"

"Yes; seen him go by when he did not see me."

"Describe him."

"Small man, dresses fine, and in Mexican lancer's uniform."

"That was not the man I killed," muttered Buffalo Bill. "Doubtless one of his officers," and he asked the hunter:

"Well, pard, is it not about breakfast time?"

"Guess so, come in."

Buffalo Bill concluded this was about as cordial an invitation as he could get, so he dismounted, took the bridle off his horse and turned it loose to feed, while he said:

"I have coffee, bacon, crackers and some other things with me, if you wish any?"

"Got plenty."

This Panther Pete proved by setting a good breakfast before the scout, who had to use his own plate, cup, knife and fork, for the hunter had only his own.

The cabin was a comfortable one; there was one bed in it, one chair, table and a number of old books; also a violin, cornet and any number of rifles, revolvers and traps for catching fur animals.

Buffalo Bill studied the man closely, questioned him as skillfully as a lawyer, but, after a couple of hours, left him without having made any discovery regarding him more than that he lived alone, sold pelts, and everybody knew Panther Pete.

"Everybody knows more than I do," muttered the scout, as he rode away from the cabin, "but I'll know more of him before many moons."

CHAPTER X.

COVERING UP HIS TRACKS.

Buffalo Bill was too shrewd a scout to be trapped, so he rode on until he found a position which commanded an entrance

to the canyon where Panther Pete dwelt, and, hiding his horse, he took his place where he could watch and see if he was followed.

He had told the hunter he was going to Fort Taos, that he had left a pack horse over in the hills, and was going to pick him up on the way.

He had waited about ten minutes, when he saw the old dweller come out of the canyon, following his trail.

Keeping on it for a quarter of a mile, he came to where there were three trails, one turning southward, the other keeping straight on, the third branching away to the northwest toward Fort Taos.

It was this one the scout had taken.

Apparently satisfied that Buffalo Bill had told him the truth, Panther Pete retraced his way and disappeared in his canyon.

Then the scout went after his horse, mounted and rode on to the top of the range, and, when there, glanced out over the prairie.

With his glass from that height, he could see a break in the prairie beyond where he had parted with the Lady in Velvet the night before. This break, he discovered, ran along toward the north for nearly a mile.

That explained the disappearance so mysteriously of the Lady in Blue. She had turned into the divide and followed it up until hidden by the approach of night.

"She knew it was there, and thus threw me off. She knew where she was going, too, and struck some trail where she met that old fox, Panther Pete. Well, I'll yet know who she is."

"Ah! The prairie is full of cattle returning to the ranch from which they stampeded, and I see cowboys rounding them up. They will come here to get stray cattle, and I do not care to be seen by any one, just now, so I'll pick up my pack horse, as I called him, and go."

Thus deciding, he rode on toward his camp of the night before, turned into the bed of the stream there, at the spot where he had buried the outlaw, and of which burial there was not a trace visible.

Riding down the stream a quarter of a mile he found the outlaw's horse awaiting, but not patiently. He was still in the stream, tied by the lasso upon either side.

Unfastening him, Buffalo Bill rode on down the water for half a mile; then he turned out just where the rocky shore would not reveal the slightest trace of a hoof track.

This hard soil continued for quite a little distance, when the scout struck into a trail running to the northward, which he followed, gradually working around to the right, so that he could cross the trail of the Woman in Velvet, as it pleased him to call her, where she must have come out of the divide.

The truth was, Buffalo Bill was determined to track the woman to her home, giving as an excuse that he desired to return to her the valuable Death Charm, the intrinsic worth of which he had not noticed until after her departure, and also to tell her that it had done good service in saving him from the outlaws.

He could not rid himself of the belief that the outlaws knew who the woman was, for the dying outlaw officer had as good as admitted it.

As for Panther Pete, Buffalo Bill looked upon him as a very mysterious personage, cunning, clever, brave and a thorough plainsman.

He had not compromised himself by a single reply to all the scout's close questioning, and had appeared much too simple to please his astute questioner. He might be innocent, but Buffalo Bill felt sure that he knew just who the Lady in Velvet was and all about her.

That he might also know more about the outlaws than he had admitted, the scout thought possible, also.

Altogether, Panther Pete, to his mind, would bear watching.

"I started out from the fort without being well enough posted. They told me that the outlaws were known as El Cobras, were generally Mexicans, half-

breeds or fugitive Americans, and had their haunts somewhere in these mountains, while I was also to keep an eye upon the Comanches."

"The colonel gave me good maps, but I was not told that I was liable to meet a beautiful woman, dressed in velvet, alone in this wilderness, see thousands of head of cattle, run upon a lone hunter and strike a band of outlaws who would spare me because I wore a Death Charm."

"I must return to the fort and get better posted, and then I will see my way clear. But, now to find the trail of the Lady in Velvet."

Halting at noon, in his wide flank movement, Buffalo Bill continued on in the afternoon in his search and later came upon a trail leading across the prairie.

It was of a single horse, coming from toward the head of the divide, and, after examining it closely for some time, he said, decidedly:

"I have found it!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE NORTHER.

The trail found by Buffalo Bill was of a single horse, and the tracks showed that the animal was going in a rapid canter.

It led from the head of the divide on the prairie, just where the Woman in Velvet had disappeared the night before—so mysteriously, and headed for the range to the northward.

It was by this range that Buffalo Bill had circled around the prairie.

His glass revealed to him, miles and miles away, horsemen driving the stampeded cattle back to their ranches, far to the eastward.

Feeling that he was to trail the woman the next day, Buffalo Bill had marked well the tracks of the horse, and was convinced that there was no mistake, and at once set out upon the trail.

But he had not gone very far before he felt a change in the air. It was early Spring, and he looked for bad weather, for the winter was not yet fully broken.

He was too good a plainsman to neglect the warning, when he felt the atmosphere drop in less than an hour some ten degrees.

Night was near at hand, and he at once felt that his wisest course would be to seek shelter.

He rode on rapidly, watching right and left, as he went, and was glad to see, at last, a sheltered nook among the hills.

And the horses were glad, too, for their instinct told them what to expect.

There was a little canyon, in the head of which was a copious spring, while the grass grew luxuriantly on each side of the tiny stream flowing from it.

This canyon was thick with an under-wood of pines, a regular thicket at its head, while heavy timber was just below.

The scout worked with lightning rapidity now, for he well understood that there was no time to lose.

The horses were run into the most dense part of the thicket and there tied securely, the saddles and traps being dragged under the shelter of a bank right by them, and which would act as a wind breaker.

Then the scout's hatchet was wielded with a will and in a few minutes he had a lot of pine boughs cut with which he made a wicky-up that would shelter him completely from the bitter-cold blast.

Then wood was gathered further down the canyon, several great armfuls being carried, while logs were dragged up with a lariat and his horse, and a large fire was kindled.

The horses were blanketed, boughs were cut to make a more thorough shelter for them; his own bed was spread in the cozy retreat and supper was put on.

The darkness now had become intense, though the sun had not yet set.

"It's a norther, and a terrible one, too, or I am greatly mistaken. I would have perished if I had not found this snug retreat," muttered Buffalo Bill, and he ate his supper hastily, to be all prepared for the storm when it should strike.

Then he looked again to the horses,

tied their blankets closer, arranged some boughs as a wind-breaker, threw another heavy log on the fire, and crept into his shelter.

Hardly had he lighted his pipe and made himself comfortable when there was heard a roar like a dozen railway trains racing, the pines bowed to the piercing blast, the darkness was intense, and the cold became terrible to endure, the two horses at once lying down to keep warm in the pine droppings, while they seemed glad of the heat of the fire blown over them.

Crashes down the canyon told how the heavy timber was being twisted and shattered by the fierce hurricane, and Buffalo Bill well knew that but for the sheltered nook he had found, his fire would have been scattered, his wicky-up torn down and the intense cold would have made both his horses and himself suffer greatly.

After the mad rush of the first fierce blow of the hurricane, the sleet began to drive along with lightning speed, and again the scout congratulated himself as he lay snugly in his retreat.

The fire roared under the pressure, but it was so well protected that it did not blow away as the scout had feared it would, and, feeling that it had set in for a night of storm, and another look at his horses showing that they were comfortable, he returned to his blankets, chilled through by only a few minutes of exposure.

But he felt the heat of the fire, and soon got comfortable again, and was sinking to sleep with no dread of danger from other than the storm on such a night, when suddenly he was startled by beholding the shadowy form of a horse and rider.

Was he asleep and dreaming?

A loud neigh convinced him to the contrary, as the horse called for help; so he quickly sprang from his blankets, drew on his boots and overcoat, and was at the side of the horseman.

He discovered that the man could not speak, he was so nearly frozen, and, pulling him quickly from his saddle, he drew off his heavy outer coat and boots, and thrust him into his warm blankets which he had just vacated.

Then he took from his saddle pouch a flask of brandy, and pouring a generous drink into his tin cup, he forced it between the lips of the stranger, who seemed nearer dead than alive.

CHAPTER XII.

THE STRANGER.

The moment that Buffalo Bill had seen to the stranger, done all that was possible for the present, he went to care for his horse, that had so nobly borne him through the howling, freezing norther to safety.

He stripped the horse of his saddle and bridle, led him to the spot where the other two were, and quickly sheltered him under the saddle blanket and another he had to spare, cutting pine boughs and piling them around and over him, for the intelligent animal had quickly lain down as the others had, and seemed to feel that all was being done for his comfort.

Then Buffalo Bill, suffering himself from the intense cold, returned and threw another log on the fire, and, sitting down by the side of the stranger, felt his hands and feet.

They were already growing warmer, and another drink of brandy was given the man, who this time seemed to be more conscious of his position.

Heating the Mexican's serape, Buffalo Bill folded it close around him, and then drew out of the coals a large stone which he had thrown there.

This he wrapped in the serape and pushed it under the blankets to the feet of the stranger, when, feeling that he must protect himself also, he drew off his boots and also got into the snug bed, feeling that his own warmth would help to restore that of the half-frozen man.

For an hour the scout lay thus, and had gotten warm himself and was glad to

feel that his patient also was thawing out.

"How do you feel now, pard?" he ventured, for the man had not spoken.

"I am warm, now, but numb. It was a close call, but you saved my life. I would have died in a few minutes more. My horse's instinct led him here."

So the man replied in broken sentences, and Buffalo Bill said:

"You are all right now, but give this flask another pull and then go to sleep."

"Thank you," and the man took a swallow of the brandy and said:

"I never saw such a storm—never felt such cold."

"It is a terror; but go to sleep now, and I'll have a cup of coffee for you in the morning, so you will be all right."

"Is my poor horse frozen?" he asked, feelingly.

"No, indeed! He is lying over there with mine, blanketed and covered with pine boughs."

"You have a noble nature to think of him in such a storm—a very noble nature. Now I will go to sleep, as you command."

In a few minutes more the stranger was sleeping peacefully, and Buffalo Bill soon after followed his example.

Thus the night passed, with snow, driving sleet and rain, as the fierce winds changed their humor; but secure in their retreat, both men and horses slept undisturbed until the dawn came, when, as suddenly as it had come on, the terrible norther blew over, and all was peace again in the great trees.

Buffalo Bill arose quietly, threw more wood upon the fire, then unblanketed the horses, who had not moved, led them to water and staked them out to feed on the rich grass, none of them the worse for the night of storm.

As the sun rose the air became balmy and the day promised to be really warm and pleasant.

Getting out his bag of supplies, Buffalo Bill cooked a good breakfast, and only when it was nearly ready he called his guest.

He had noted that the stranger rode a very fine horse, that his saddle was a Texas tree, studded with silver and of the very best make, while his serapes were of silk and wool.

His hat was a slouch of fine texture, and his boots handsome ones and with silver spurs.

"Some ranchero who got astray," was the comment of the scout, regarding his guest, and then he called him.

The stranger aroused himself with a seeming effort, but, realizing at last where he was, he arose quickly and said:

"Ah! I remember now. You saved my life, sir!" and he gazed with considerable interest upon Buffalo Bill.

"Your horse did, sir, for he brought you to my lone camp, and fortunately I had prepared for the storm, seeing it coming on."

"I did not, for I was in the timber and did not realize its coming until I was caught. I had not a match; to cross the prairie to the settlement was madness, and before I was aware of it I was freezing to death."

"I can never forget your kindness, sir, never!" and he extended his hand, which Buffalo Bill grasped.

He saw before him a fine-appearing personage, with dark face, black hair and eyes, and the look of a Mexican, though he spoke English without the slightest accent.

He was a handsome, courtly man, yet with the look of one who had led a wild life, and was dressed in a style that was considered "sporty" on the border.

"I am Taylor Travis, sir, a ranchero, and as there was a general stampede of cattle from the ranches, I rode out to help round them up, but got separated from the others."

"To whom, may I ask, do I owe the debt I cannot repay, of my life?"

"I am a scout at Fort Taos, sir. My comrades call me Buffalo Bill, but my name is William Cody," was the scout's modest reply.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LOST TRAIL.

The stranger glanced fixedly at the scout as he spoke his name and said, thoughtfully:

"Had you only said William Cody, I might not have known you; but as Buffalo Bill I know you well by reputation, and you look just the man to win the name you have. I hope we will be good friends, Mr. Cody."

"I see no reason why we should not, sir; but breakfast is ready, or will be by the time you have made your toilet," and Buffalo Bill handed the stranger a towel, soap and comb.

He quickly walked to the stream and soon returned, feeling much refreshed.

"It was kind of you to care for me so well and allow me to sleep until the last moment, while you also took good care of my horse, I see."

"My horse is my pard, sir, and I could never neglect a dumb brute. The other animal you see is one I found with saddle and bridle on, and as he has no owner, I appropriated him."

"Yes, finding is keeping, out here," replied Taylor Travis, whom Buffalo Bill had seen particularly regarding the outlaw's horse, and hence had spoken, for he did not know but what the man he had killed might have stolen him from the settlement and his guest have recognized him.

Complimenting the scout upon his very good breakfast, Taylor Travis, who had seemed to regard him with increased interest, said:

"May I ask if that costly trinket is a badge given for services you have rendered?"

"I may say yes, and no, to that, for I got it for a service rendered, and not, as you doubtless surmise, from the army."

Taylor Travis looked at the fire with added interest, and replied:

"I supposed it was an army decoration for gallant services."

"No, sir; it is not, and I got it only yesterday. You spoke of the stampede of cattle, and I saw, from a range some thirty miles from here, a lady in danger, for she stood by the side of her horse, which lay dead upon the prairie, and she was in the path of the maddened herd. I went to her rescue, was fortunate enough to save her, and to secure from an old hunter, Panther Pete, a horse for her to ride."

"Her name, who she was, I do not know, but when she parted with me she pinned this beautiful and costly trinket on my breast, calling it a Death Charm. Until she left me I did not realize its value, and then I decided to follow her, but she had disappeared. I went into camp on the range, was lassoed by a band of nine outlaws, who were going to hang me, but saw this Death Charm and set me free."

"To-day I intended tracking the fair stranger to her home and return the badge, but the storm has destroyed the trail of her horse and I must give it up. But I'll describe her, and perhaps you, sir, can tell me who the lady is."

With rapt attention the stranger had listened to the story of the Death Charm, and when Buffalo Bill had described the fair donor of the gift to him, he said, thoughtfully:

"I cannot conceive who she can be. Such a woman as you describe does not certainly belong over in the settlements, for I know all there are at the ranches."

"The woman is as much a mystery to me, Mr. Cody, as to you, and now that the storm has washed out the trail, I fear you will never find her."

"Perhaps not, sir, but when I do I will return this costly gift."

"And lose your Death Charm?"

"I am not superstitious enough to believe in its virtues."

"And yet confess that it saved you from the El Cobras."

Buffalo Bill made no reply, for there came to him the thought of his having also escaped death at his lone camp.

"It is a beautiful thing, and I advise you to keep it. Yes, do not give your

Death Charm away, my friend. It may be the harbinger of more good than you dream."

"Just now I cannot as I proposed, because I am unable to find the lady who gave it to me; but this bauble certainly must be worth a great deal of money, and to keep it seems to me as though I was accepting a reward for my service."

"I do not so regard it, and would say keep it; yes, test its virtues again, and see if it is not a veritable talisman—a real Death Charm. But, do you go toward the settlement, Mr. Cody?"

"No, to Fort Taos, now."

"Then our trails divide, for which I am sorry. I must proceed to the settlement."

"Taylor Travis is my name, as I told you. Don't forget it, for I hope to see you at my home, some day, for I would like to prove my appreciation of your service to me."

"It was no more than any one would have done, sir."

Buffalo Bill led up the three horses, the ranchero saddling his own animal, and mounting in a way that showed the thorough horseman.

Then the two men, so strangely met, shook hands warmly and parted, one riding toward the prairie, the other in the direction of the stockade.

"I may be wrong, but it seems as though I had seen that man before," mused the scout, as he rode on his way, and then added:

"Well, I have lost the trail of my Lady in Velvet, and now back to the fort, for I must get better posted before I start out again. I am on a treble trail, this time, or I miss my guess. There is more mystery here to unravel than the haunts of El Cobras."

"Buffalo Bill, you are on your mettle, now; see that you are neither beaten nor baffled in this lay-out."

And the thoughtful, serious expression on his fine face, of marked Athenian mold, showed that the heroic in his nature was to assert itself, no matter what the price of the quest.

CHAPTER XIV.

DOUBLE RETRIBUTION.

It was drawing toward evening when Buffalo Bill ascended a range of hills and halted his horse upon the summit, while he viewed with admiration the grand view before him.

The trail he was following wound in a zigzag course down the slope, passing rocks and trees on its way that dotted the hillside, and beyond was a broken, rolling country of plain, valley, hills and a winding stream, with far in the distance a mountain ridge, upon which stood Fort Taos.

"There is no hurry, and I would be late in the night getting in, so I will camp on the river to-night—ah! There comes a horseman," and he turned his glass upon the one that had caught his eye. "Yes, it is a soldier, and he is riding very rapidly; a courier, doubtless, bearing important despatches."

So saying, Buffalo Bill threw himself upon the grass, allowing his horses to wander and feed at will, and thus awaited the coming of the horseman.

The trail would bring him within fifty feet of him, and the scout was anxious to know if anything had gone wrong at the fort.

The manner in which the soldier rode indicated that he was upon an important mission, and at the speed he was forcing his horse Buffalo Bill knew that the animal must be well used up, as it was thirty long miles to the fort.

"I will give him the outlaw's horse, for he is comparatively fresh," he said.

Still watching the rider, he saw him reach the hill and there draw his tired horse to a walk.

He turned in his saddle and kept constantly looking behind him, as though he was enjoying the scenery as he mounted higher and higher.

"One would think he was pursued," muttered the scout, and just then the

soldier halted, turned his horse and looked back over his trail for several minutes.

Then he dismounted and, holding the rein of his bridle in hand, began to walk up the hill, evidently to spare his tired horse.

He had gotten within several hundred yards of where the scout lay upon the ground, shielded by the ridge and some pines from view, when suddenly there burst forth from behind a rock on the side of the trail a puff of white smoke, a report followed and the soldier fell in his tracks, shot from an ambush.

A wild, triumphant yell followed, and two Indians sprang into view from behind the rock, and ran toward the fallen soldier.

Buffalo Bill recognized their intention in an instant; it was to scalp their victim.

One of the Indians wore the full war bonnet of a Comanche chief, the other was a warrior.

The chief held a rifle in his hand as he ran, the warrior carried a lance and bow and arrows.

In an instant Buffalo Bill had called his horse to his side, was in his saddle and dashing down the slope.

He did not count odds in going to the rescue, for he could see that the soldier was still alive, and had half raised himself in a position of defense, while he held a revolver in his hand.

Giving his own thrilling war cry, to let the Indians know of his presence, and to frighten them away from their purpose, Buffalo Bill dashed swiftly to the rescue.

The scout's war cry startled the two Comanches and they halted and turned quickly.

But they saw only one horseman and the chief turned to meet him, hastily reloading his rifle as he did so, and giving an order to the brave, who bounded on toward the wounded soldier.

Seeing that the chief would face him alone, Buffalo Bill drew rein, leaped from his saddle and advanced on foot toward the Comanche, who was making for the cover of some rocks.

Once there he would have a great advantage, Buffalo Bill knew, and so he quickly risked a shot.

The Indian fell, but was up in an instant, and started to leap on toward the rocks, for one foot had been rendered useless by the scout's shot.

Rapidly Buffalo Bill ran to head him off, and suddenly dropped, just as the chief fired.

The bullet did not miss him an inch, and then again his rifle flashed and the Comanche dropped dead.

Without a glance at him the scout ran on toward the spot where the soldier lay, again wounded, for an arrow was sticking in his shoulder, and the Comanche had sought cover, as the revolver of the white man had proven dangerous.

Seeing his chief fall, the warrior became desperate, as he beheld Buffalo Bill rushing upon him, and he darted upon the soldier to kill him and get possession of his firearms, and fired his arrows as he ran.

But the wounded soldier pulled trigger rapidly, and as he saw the warrior go down under his fire, he dropped back as though he, too, was fatally hurt.

Another moment and Buffalo Bill reached the spot.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SOLDIER'S CONFESSION.

"Well, pard, retribution came quick on those fellows, but let me see how badly you are hurt," and Buffalo Bill knelt by the side of the wounded soldier, who said, in a low tone:

"And retribution followed quickly to me—it was a double retribution. I am dying, Buffalo Bill, for I recognize you as the new scout from the Northwest."

"I hope you are not badly wounded, pard."

"Let me see."

"Yes, but it will do no good, for the rifle bullet did the work, the arrow wounds are nothing."

Buffalo Bill drew the arrows from the wounds, one in the shoulder, the other in the hip, and then opening the uniform jacket and shirt, looked at the bullet wound.

It was in the chest, and Buffalo Bill's experienced glance told him that the bullet had entered the lung and the result would be fatal.

"I told you so—it will kill me. Tell me the truth," said the soldier, not waiting for the scout to speak.

"You are a soldier and a brave man, so I will tell you the truth. The wound is fatal."

"I knew it, but I am not a brave man, for I am a coward, a deserter. Last night I killed a fellow soldier, the orderly sergeant of my troop, and I thought I had covered my tracks up well, but I feared I was suspected, and I fled soon after."

"I suppose I am pursued, but what matters it now, for I will be beyond punishment. I will tell you why I killed him. It was for the accursed love of gold. I entered the army only to kill him. He did not know me, but I knew him, and he stood between me and a fortune."

"With him out of the way it would be left to me, and so I devoted my life to removing him from my path. I entered the army under an assumed name, joined his troop and plotted for one aim. I accomplished it, and retribution has come quickly. But they won't hang a dying man, will they?"

"No, and you are a dying man. Have you anything more to say, anything you would wish me to do for you?"

"Yes. I have with me papers that tell who I am, what I have been. If the sergeant had any heirs, let them get the benefit of his fortune, for he did not know of what was to be his."

"It was all the work of a wicked lawyer and myself. He tempted me, by telling me I would be rich but for a man in my way."

"He told me who the man was, that no one but him knew where to find him, that I could get him put out of the way and we would share the fortune together. His name is there with those papers; he brought me to this, so let him suffer as he deserves; his own letters will condemn him."

The scout could not but be impressed by the soldier's confession, and he told him he would place all in the hands of the colonel at the fort.

Then he explained that his horse was loose, the soldier's horse was straying away, he had another animal upon the ridge, and where there was a chief and a brave alone together that there must be others near.

He made the soldier as comfortable as he could and at once went after his horse, that came at his call.

The soldier's horse was next caught, and then the outlaw pony upon the ridge.

As he returned Buffalo Bill paused by the side of the Comanche he had slain, and saw that he was a full chief, for his costume so indicated.

Returning to the soldier he found him still alive, but sinking fast, and sitting down beside him he did all in his power to soothe his dying moments.

Only in the faintest tone could the man speak now; his face had assumed the pallor of death, his lips were set, and with a pleading look upon the scout, a silent appeal for help, he breathed his last, the hand of Buffalo Bill clasping his until he felt the grip release.

"Poor fellow! His retribution did come quick indeed. Well, I've got a task upon my hands, of caring for three dead bodies, for I will take all to the fort."

"But first to find those redskins' ponies," and Buffalo Bill mounted his horse and set out on his search.

He knew that the Indians were not on foot, for without his horse a Comanche is next to worthless.

They had evidently seen the soldier coming a long way off, hidden their horses and gone into ambush near the trail.

Taking in the nature of the surroundings, Buffalo Bill picked out about where he thought the ponies had been left and rode there.

But he went cautiously, not caring to run into a trap should a brave have been left with the horses.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EMPTY GRAVE.

Buffalo Bill approached the thicket with a caution engendered by long habit in looking out for danger.

But he saw no foe, received no shot from under cover, and found the two ponies of the Indians hitched among the pines.

They were good animals, but looked to have been hard ridden, their riders having been separated, doubtless, from a prowling band of warriors, and were making for their retreat when they discovered the soldier, and congratulated themselves upon their find.

Taking the horses in lead, he returned to the spot where he had left the soldier.

Enveloped in his blanket, he placed him upon his saddle and strapped him there securely.

The Indians were then tied upon the backs of their ponies, and, mounting, with four animals now in lead, Buffalo Bill set off for the river, where he intended to camp for the night.

He reached there before sunset, and went into camp on the river bank, at a spot where the timber was scattering, but the grass good.

Just where he halted he was surprised to see an open grave. It was well dug, deep, and empty!

It had been recently dug, too, for the earth was fresh, and the place was well chosen for the last resting-place of some poor unfortunate who had not yet been laid to rest there.

It was on a slight rise just on the river bank, and commanding a view for a long distance around, while it was several hundred yards off of the trail, and where it crossed the stream, which was fordable at points far apart.

The open grave, grim as it looked, did not drive Buffalo Bill to seek a camp elsewhere, for he determined to halt just there.

Unsaddling his horses, he staked them out, gathered some wood for a fire, placed the body of the dead soldier to one side, the Indians near it, and while the fire was getting headway, he spread his blankets for the night.

Then he cooked and ate his supper, smoked his pipe, and quietly pondered over that open grave, the firelight revealing it distinctly.

But he could not account for its presence there, and unoccupied, so gave up trying, and turned in, determined to make an early start in the morning, but first to give the two Indians the benefit of the grave he had found.

Rising early, he had his breakfast, and was preparing to carry out his intention of burying the Indians, and not carrying them further, when his horse gave a low neigh, which the scout well knew was one of alarm.

Instantly he was on the alert, and in the dim light of early morning he beheld a band of Indians coming down the river bank.

There were a dozen of them, at least, and of course they had seen his fire and were coming to investigate.

He was about to mount quickly, for his horse was saddled, leave the dead redskins, and, with the body of the soldier, push for the ford, when, to his surprise, he beheld a second body of Indians coming up the river bank toward him.

He thought to still dash out on the plain, trusting in the speed of his horse, and being compelled to leave the soldier's body and the other animals, when a third party of mounted warriors were visible, heading him off in that direction.

A grim smile crossed his face, as he prepared to stand at bay, and he muttered:

"The grave comes in handy."

Then he took in the situation for and against him.

There were three bands of warriors, and he was cut off from escape.

To take to the river would be to go down with the current and be killed by the redskins on the bank.

But suddenly a thought flashed through his mind.

"You can go." And he spoke to his horse.

In an instant he had written on a slip of paper with a pencil, these words:

"Am corralled near ford—about forty Comanches. "B. B."

Tying this with a buckskin string about the neck of his horse, he led the animal to the bank, forced him in, and said:

"Go to the fort, sir!"

The intelligent horse seemed to know just what was expected of him, and swam rapidly down-stream toward the ford, while the scout played the ruse of trying to catch him, not to let the redskins suspect that he was a dumb courier with an appeal for aid.

Then Buffalo Bill began action for defence.

The Indians had all halted beyond rifle range.

The number of horses seen made them cautious, fearing that many riders.

But Buffalo Bill lost no time in preparing for deadly work, and the place of refuge he sought was the empty grave.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SCOUT AT BAY.

Down into the grave leaped Buffalo Bill, having led the two Indian ponies, the outlaw's horse, and the one ridden by the soldier close up around it, saddled and bridled as they were.

The three dead bodies were first placed upon the two sides and one end of the grave, and a log on the end toward the river.

This brought the scout's head just over the breastwork of earth and dead humanity.

He saw that the Indians were yelling at his horse, trying to turn him back, and two braves rode hard for the ford to try and head him off.

It was an anxious moment for Buffalo Bill, and he gave a shout of delight as he saw his noble horse reach the ford ahead of the braves.

They had thrown their lassoes, but missed, and, wheeling to the right, he had dashed up the bank and was off like a shot for the fort, the redskins little dreaming of the message he bore.

The two braves crossed the river, hoping he would halt there, and they would catch him.

But Buffalo Bill knew their hopes were vain, and paid no more attention to them.

In fact, he had to look out for himself just then.

The Indians had approached near enough to see that there were two horses and two ponies in the little clump of timber about the grave.

If that meant four riders, they were not able to see them. They had seen but one.

Then they gave vent to a series of wild yells, and grew very excited.

Buffalo Bill knew just what this meant, for he muttered:

"They have recognized the two ponies."

Shouting to each other, each band began to string out now, and they advanced until the semi-circle was complete, each end resting upon the river.

Then they began to slowly advance toward the scout.

He knew what it meant—that they intended to charge in upon him.

So he said:

"I am sorry, poor fellows, but it's self-preservation, you know—or, rather, you don't know. You must die to make me more secure."

He sprang out of the grave as he spoke, and in an instant his knife had sunk deep into the neck of the soldier's horse.

The animal fell dead in his tracks, and, with an effort of his great strength, Buffalo Bill had dragged him alongside of the grave.

The outlaw's horse came next, and then one of the Indian ponies, the other breaking away before he could be sacrificed.

The Indians were advancing slowly, but not yet within range of the scout's splendid repeating rifle.

They halted at the dashing away of the Indian pony, and did not seem to at first realize just what was happening.

Then it burst upon them, and, with wild yells, they came forward.

They seemed to know now that they had but one man to deal with, two at least, and, not seeing the grave, they supposed the horses were the only breastwork for him to fight behind.

Buffalo Bill had glanced along the line, and quickly picked out the braves who carried firearms.

They were not more than eight or ten in number, he was glad to see.

But all were armed with lances, bows and arrows.

"This empty grave is the very spot to fight from," said Buffalo Bill, as he had arranged the bodies of men and horses to his liking, cast a glance far across the plain to where his noble steed had disappeared, and the two Indians were returning from their useless errand, and then brought his rifle ready for use.

Before him, upon the edge of the grave, lay the dead soldier's rifle, also a repeater, and his belt of arms, along with his own, ready for quick use.

The ammunition was there also, and standing up in the grave, Buffalo Bill felt that he could make a desperate fight of it.

"If I go under there will be walling in the Comanche camp," he said, sternly, and, concluding that it was time to give the redskins a sample of what they had to expect if they crowded him, he drew a bead upon their chief, as his war-bonnet showed him to be.

He was about the center of the semi-circle, and thus about the furthest off of all.

But, with the report of the rifle, he went backward off of his spotted pony.

Then followed rapidly, shot after shot, first aimed here, then there, and with as deliberate aim as possible under the circumstances.

Blaves rolled out of their saddles, killed or wounded, ponies went down, and, as the empty rifle of the scout was thrown aside and the soldier's weapon seized and began to rattle, the redskins began to recoil when almost upon their prey.

The recoil meant a quick retreat, and they sought safety by getting out of range as quickly as possible.

Stern-faced, with lips set, eyes burning with the fire of battle, Buffalo Bill stood at bay in the open grave, an arrow in his shoulder, a second one in his arm, and two more having pierced his broad sombrero, while still another had grazed his cheek and left its red gash there.

But he had beaten back the first charge.

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNDER SUSPICION.

Fort Taos occupied a most commanding and advantageous position, and had a large extent of country to guard.

With the Taos Mountains to the north, the Sacramento Mountains to the southward, the Rio Grande River on the one hand and the Rio Pecos on the other, surrounded by fertile plains, and in a country where men had the gold fever, others were cattle and ranch owners, the Indians were generally in an ugly humor toward the whites and there were outlaws haunting the trails to rob the coaches and wagon trains, raiding the ranches for booty and cattle, the soldiers of Fort Taos had their hands full.

The garrison was a strong one, but there were so many counter-interests to guard that officers, men and scouts were kept busy, and hence the band of outlaws known as El Cobras had steadily increased their number and were adding daily to their list of lawless deeds.

No one could have asked for a more delightful situation than that of Fort Taos, for it was located upon a hill that ten times its force could not have taken by storm, while right at hand were fertile

meadow lands for the herds of cattle and the horses.

There was a valley of the richest soil near, which had been fenced in and was cultivated for the use of the garrison, and as a guard over it the scouts, some twenty in number, and the cowboys of equal force, had their camps there.

The fort proper was large, and was a combination of rock, adobe and stockade.

Its quarters were of the best, and as the summit of the hill was a natural park, it was a picturesque and delightful spot to dwell.

Colonel Nelson Kane was the commandant, and he had been sent there as the right man in the right place, for he was a born soldier and knew just how to deal with the Indians and lawless element he would come in contact with, while he spoke Spanish well, could understand well the Mexican people who were scattered about the country, and was, besides, an officer who knew how to keep his men up to the highest standard, would act quickly in danger and was stern and uncompromising when there was need to be.

His men idolized him, yet feared him, and were never fearful of consequences when he was in the lead.

He had some five hundred soldiers under his command, an eight-gun light field battery, a battalion of infantry, and another of cavalry.

But, with this force, he had not been able to more than keep the Comanches in check and the outlaws had struck a number of severe blows upon the gold camps, the wagon trains and settlements.

To crush them, he felt that he must find their retreats and run down their daring and skillful leader, and as his best scouts had failed to locate the strongholds of the outlaws, he had sent a request to the commandant of a Northwestern post for the loan of his Chief of Scouts, a man who had served under him in several campaigns, and whose worth he well knew.

That man was Buffalo Bill, and he had promptly volunteered for the work when Colonel Kane's brother officer had told him of the request, and the duty he would have to go upon at Fort Taos.

Of course Buffalo Bill knew that he would be going upon what to him was new territory, and among a strange people.

He had never fought the Comanches, and had had no dealing with Mexican outlaws, but he was an Indian fighter, and had been a successful hunter of lawless men, so did not shrink from the task, and one evening rode up alone to Fort Taos and reported for duty.

All had been told to him of what he was expected to do, and it at once became noised around that Buffalo Bill had been appointed a special scout at the fort, and was to serve as the chief of that most valuable band of men in buckskin, the right arm of the army.

After a day spent at the fort, where he found some friends among officers and men, Buffalo Bill had gone out alone on a scout, as he said, to "get the lay of the land."

He had been gone a couple of days when one night all at the fort were shocked by learning that a sergeant of one of the troops had been killed.

But when he was taken to the hospital by the cowboys who found him on the trail to their camp, it was found that he was not dead, though the surgeons gave no hope that he would live.

Then the query went around as to who had done the dastardly deed, for the sergeant could utter no word to explain the affair.

Not a soul in the fort was suspected, for the sergeant was universally popular and had not a foe that any of his comrades were aware of.

Why was the sergeant out of the fort?

It was true the soldiers were allowed to go over to the scouts' camp, when they asked permission, and the captain of his troop said that he did not recall giving him such leave, though the officer of the day remembered that he had al-

lowed the sergeant to pass out just before sunset.

Then it was that a thorough investigation was made to find the murderer.

One member of the troop the orderly sergeant belonged to was reported on the sick list.

So he was not called upon.

But the next evening the acting orderly sergeant of the troop reported that the horse of this same soldier, Stanley Otis, by name, was missing.

"Go to the hospital and ask Otis about his horse," ordered the captain.

The sergeant obeyed, to discover that though Private Otis had reported sick at the hospital, he had not remained there, telling the steward that it was but a temporary attack and he would return to his company.

Further investigation proved that Private Otis had passed out of the fort the night of Orderly Sergeant's Eckford's being shot, showing a pass signed by his captain to visit the scouts' camp, and had not returned.

Thus suspicion at once fell upon Private Stanley Otis as the one who had fired upon Orderly Sergeant Eckford.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RIDE TO THE RESCUE.

The moment that Lieutenant McKenny Willis, acting captain of the troop to which Orderly Sergeant Otis Eckford and Private Stanley Otis belonged, discovered that the latter had disappeared, he felt that he was the one who had fired upon the sergeant.

For the first time it struck the lieutenant that the two men bore one name alike, Otis being the surname of the private and the Christian name of the sergeant.

Was this a coincidence, or were the two men in some way connected, he wondered.

Certainly they had been most devoted friends, apparently.

Going to the hospital he learned just how Private Otis had reported and left there.

Then he went to the troops' quarters and discovered that Otis had departed shortly after the discovery of the sergeant lying wounded on the trail.

The officer who had passed Otis through the gate had said the pass he carried was signed by Lieutenant Willis.

The lieutenant had given no such pass, hence it was a forgery.

At once he reported his discoveries to Colonel Kane, and that officer said, in a decided tone:

"Otis did the deed, and must be found."

"You can do nothing now, for it is dark, but have your junior officer and a score of men, with the best scout at the fort, ready to start at the first glimmer of day upon his trail, though it is unfortunate that by then he will have nearly thirty-six hours' start."

"Yes, sir; but I will go prepared to follow him any distance, for I will go myself, sir. I find that Otis prepared for his flight well, for he took his citizens' suit, blankets, provisions and stole my repeating rifle, sir."

"He must be taken, Lieutenant Willis, dead or alive. I only wish Cody was here to go with you, for that man can trail a bird."

"I wish that he was, sir. I will be in the saddle awaiting for dawn with my men," and the lieutenant, a tall, handsome fellow, the Adonis of the fort, and with all his good looks the hardest fighter and best of soldiers, returned to his quarters to prepare for his chase of the fugitive trooper.

Lieutenant Willis was a hard rider, and his men had followed his style.

He had picked from his troop a sergeant, corporal, bugler, two scouts and sixteen men, along with his own negro servant, who led a couple of pack animals.

Several extra horses had also been taken along, so that the party would not be delayed by the breaking down of one or more of the animals.

But he had picked his horses as well,

and when the sun rose, he was several miles away from the fort, following hot upon the trail of Private Otis, which the scouts had at once picked up and started upon.

It was about the middle of the forenoon when the scouts, who were ahead, were seen to halt upon a rise, and, dashing forward, Lieutenant Willis saw coming toward them at full speed a riderless horse, without saddle or bridle.

"It is Chief Cody's horse, sir," said Dot Driver, a scout who was not over five feet in height and weighed only a hundred pounds, but was every inch a man.

"Yes, sir; Dot is right," said Brazos Ben, the other scout.

"We will try and catch him," the lieutenant answered.

But there was no need of that, for the horse gave a loud neigh and ran right up to the side of the lieutenant's horse.

"Ah! Here is a note tied about his neck!" and the lieutenant snatched it off and read aloud what Buffalo Bill had read.

"Ho, men, Buffalo Bill needs our aid. Secure his horse and come on, for moments are precious when life is at stake."

"Forward!" and the gallant officer dashed to the front, and away went the little band of rescuers at full speed.

It was fully half a dozen miles to the ford, all knew, and Buffalo Bill's horse had to cover that distance before he had reached them, so that it would be over an hour after he had sent his dumb messenger for aid before he could get it.

The men all realized this, and wondered if they would arrive too late.

But they were following a leader who rode at a breakneck pace, and they were doing all in their power to reach the scene where Buffalo Bill was at bay.

The scouts told the officer that if he was near the ford, as the short note stated, they knew of no good place there to stand off the redskins.

If he got under the protection of the bank, they said, the Indians could cross at the ford and kill him from across the river, while the trees were too scattering to afford much protection.

But the scouts could not understand just how he had been able to send his horse away with that note and not come himself.

"We will find out when we get there."

"Now we must ride to the rescue," said Lieutenant Willis, and he urged his horse to a faster pace, though he was now in a rapid run.

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT THE TROOPERS FOUND.

Every trooper was nerved to what was before him, what he might find at the end of his hard ride.

Buffalo Bill was a new man in their midst, but they had all heard of his many deeds of daring.

They wished to show him they were most willing to answer his appeal for help.

The lieutenant was close on to the heels of the scouts' horses now, as they dashed along, still following the trail of the fugitive soldier, which was leading to the ford, all were glad to see.

On, on, they went, every horse at full speed, every trooper on his mettle.

Lieutenant Willis had in his mind an incident of two years before, when he and a small party of soldiers were corralled by a large band of Sioux, and Buffalo Bill had taken his life in his hands to slip out and go for aid.

He recalled that he had killed the guard over the Indian ponies, had selected the best animal he could in the darkness, and then had made a forty-mile ride to the fort, his horse dropping dead before he reached there, and the scout, then on foot, had run the mile intervening, and in half an hour was guiding a command back to the rescue.

Just when hope had been abandoned, and brave soldiers were ready to die, then and there, Buffalo Bill had come in sight, and behind him a long line of troopers on horses, that were staggering under the strain.

"He saved us then, and we must save

him now," muttered the daring lieutenant, who had always been the warm friend of the King of the Border, as Buffalo Bill was known in the Northwest.

At last there came in sight a long line of heavy timber.

It was the fringe of trees that ran along the banks of the river.

A valley led directly to the ford, hiding with its sheltering hills the approach to the river, for the scouts followed its course instead of the direct trail along the ridge, which would have brought them into view.

Into the timber they dashed, then through the cut to the river, and they were forcing their horses across to the other side, still unseen by the redskins.

The last man across, the noise of the splashing waters was no longer heard, and then to the ears of the troopers came the yells of a hundred redskins and the rattle of a score of rifles.

They were starting upon their last charge.

But with several quick orders from Lieutenant Willis, loud rang out the bugle notes. The men rushed into line, their carbines began to rattle, and almost in the very moment of victory the redskins had to face the despair of defeat.

They were startled by the suddenness of the shock, their warriors were falling under the well-aimed carbines of the cavalry, and with savage cries they were stampeded.

They would have rallied under shelter, but there was no shelter, and with two dozen men in sight, and the bugler seated on his horse at the ford, his face turned back over the trail, and the notes ringing lustily, as though calling more men into action, the Comanches sought safety in wild flight.

"I'll pursue for a feint, and then rally back here on this rise," called out Lieutenant Willis, and the pretended pursuit set the Indians going faster until they disappeared over a distant rise.

"Press to the top of that hill, sergeant, and then return," called out the lieutenant, and he turned quickly to the little rise in the timber on the river bank.

There he found the scout at bay.

Standing in the open grave was Buffalo Bill, coolly looking out over the scene where late had been a hundred of his foes.

He looked very stern, his eyes flashing, and there were red and black stains upon his face and hands.

The body of the dead Indian just across the foot of the grave, and those of the horses dragged close around it, looked like a pin cushion, for scores of arrows were sticking in them, while others were about in trees and in the ground.

"Holy smoke! Buffalo Bill, is that you or your ghost?" cried Lieutenant Willis, as he beheld the scout standing in the grave, as has been described.

"I can swear that I am alive, lieutenant, but if you had not arrived as you did I would have now been dead—I owe you my life, sir," and, springing out of the grave, Buffalo Bill extended his hand, which the lieutenant wrung, and said:

"The debt of my life is cancelled, Bill, but let me see if you are badly hurt."

"All scratches, sir. I'm all right," was the smiling reply, and Buffalo Bill dragged the clinging arrows from his clothing just as the men came up and gave him a cheer.

In a few words he told his story, and how he had beaten off the redskins in their first attack, but felt that they would overwhelm him in their second charge, when suddenly the bugle notes had reached his ears.

But though the officer and men listened attentively to the scout's words, their eyes rested upon the dead body of Private Stanley Otis, the fugitive soldier.

CHAPTER XXI.

ON THE COMANCHES' TRAIL.

Buffalo Bill could not but see the interested glances of all cast upon the dead soldier, whose body had a dozen or more arrows sticking in it, for the Comanches had fired showers of the dangerous mis-

siles at the scout, as was plainly evidenced by the surroundings.

"It is a miracle, Cody, how you escaped death from all these arrows, and there are a number of rifle shots also, I see," said Lieutenant Willis.

"They were not aimed just right, sir," and his eyes just then falling upon the sparkling badge pinned upon his breast, he added, with a smile:

"And I guess there is some virtue in this also, sir."

"What is it, Cody?"

"A Death Charm, sir."

"Nonsense! But it is a very elegant and remarkable ornament."

"Yes, sir; and it is claimed to be a Death Charm, and I almost believe it now. I will tell you about it, some time, sir. But I see you are anxious to know about this dead soldier whose body protected me so well."

"You were in pursuit of him, I take it, sir, as my horse could not have gotten very many miles from here with my call for aid."

"We met him half a dozen miles back."

"And rode like a cyclone to get here. It was like you, sir."

"Yes, we rode rapidly, but we were not making slow time when we met your horse, for we were pursuing that soldier."

"You met him and he was killed here, I suppose?"

"Not here, sir," and Buffalo Bill told of his seeing the fugitive coming, the ambush of the chief and warrior, and that the dying soldier made a confession to him which he would make known to Colonel Kane.

Of his camp and discovery by the Indians the scout also told, and Lieutenant Willis asked:

"But who dug that grave?"

"I give it up, sir; but I guess it was dug for me, as I made use of it."

"It was dug by white men, and with spades, too."

"Yes, sir."

"And recently?"

"Within the last forty-eight hours, sir, I should say."

"Well, we'll try and get at the bottom of the mystery, for we camp here a couple of hours for rest. Well, sergeant, what have you to report?"

"The Indians continued their flight, sir, and the two scouts said they would follow them for a mile and then return."

"They had half a dozen killed and wounded to carry off with them, sir, and had lost a dozen ponies, I counted."

"Some of Scout Cody's fine work, sergeant; but we camp here for a couple of hours, so look well to your horses and then have dinner."

"Now, Cody, I insist upon tying up those wounds you call scratches," and the lieutenant soon had the wounds dressed, and which were, indeed, slight.

That the band of Comanches were the braves of the chief who had ambushed the fugitive soldier, having become separated from them in some way, there was no doubt, and Lieutenant Willis gave orders to bury all of the dead redskins in the open grave, but to carry the body of Otis back to the fort.

This was done, and Dot Driver and Brazos Ben soon after came into camp and reported that the Comanches were making all speed in their flight, evidently expecting a hot pursuit by a large force of troopers.

The two men were delighted at Buffalo Bill's escape and loud in their praise of the splendid stand he had made at bay.

The lieutenant and Buffalo Bill had their dinner together, and the officer was told the story of the fugitive soldier and his dying confession.

In return Buffalo Bill heard that Sergeant Otis Eckford was not dead, but lay most seriously, perhaps fatally, wounded at the fort.

As Buffalo Bill thought it best to make a show of pursuing the redskins, and said that he felt sure other bands were upon the warpath, Lieutenant Willis decided that he would send one of the scouts back to the fort with all speed, asking for the rest of his troop to be sent, and as many soldiers as the colonel deemed necessary,

while a couple of men would return at a slower pace with the body of Private Otis.

The scout was at once despatched, with orders to ride hard, the two men with the body of Otis set off at a slower pace, and the horses being well rested, Lieutenant Willis ordered "boots and saddles" sounded by the bugler, and the command set off on the trail of the Indians, Buffalo Bill once more mounted upon his splendid horse that had served him so well.

There were half a dozen of the killed and wounded Indians whose ponies had run off uncaught, and these were quickly roped and brought in by Buffalo Bill and Brazos Ben, and taken along.

"I have let two soldiers and Dot Driver go, Cody, but in return I have you, so that more than makes up for their absence," said the lieutenant, as he rode ahead with Buffalo Bill on the trail of the Comanches.

But Buffalo Bill made no reply, and calling Brazos Ben, said:

"Take the left flank; I will go to the right, and, lieutenant, advance very slowly, sir, for I have an idea that this is a splendid country for an ambush."

"Brazos Ben, a signal of danger will be a single pistol-shot," and the two men filed away to the right and left.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN APPEAL FOR HELP.

"Sergeant, that man Cody has the instinct of a hound where danger is concerned. He is a wonder."

"When I was up in the Northwest, before I was ordered to my present troop, I was on staff duty with General Crook, and I saw the reports Cody would bring in, and they never failed. The man was born for this kind of work."

So said Lieutenant Willis as Buffalo Bill and Brazos Ben rode away, and he beckoned to the sergeant to approach, the latter replying, with a respectful salute:

"Yes, sir, the men all say, who know him, that Mr. Cody is a remarkable man, sir, and his fight in that grave proved it to those of us who did not know him save by name."

"Yes, and happy I am that we were just in time."

"It was your riding did it, sir; the men all say that."

"Now, any other scout would have pushed right on here, feeling sure that the Comanches were running away with all speed; but Buffalo Bill has scented danger, and I'll wager that he is right—that if we went ahead we would go into a trap."

"No doubt, sir."

"I will now move on slowly, sergeant, and without any order," and the sergeant fell back to his place and the band of troopers moved ahead at a walk, Spurs, the negro servant of the lieutenant, bringing up the rear.

There was the Indian trail to follow, plain and fresh, and it showed that the ponies had been kept at a run.

Still, Buffalo Bill had scented danger, and it was best to go slow.

The nature of the country, Lieutenant Willis saw, was the very best for an ambush.

It was rolling, with high hills, canyons, cliffs and narrow valleys, all heavily timbered.

The trail ran through the valleys and canyons once it had crossed the ridge, and one could not see over a couple of hundred yards ahead.

But as far as the eye could see the Indian trail was visible.

Thus miles were gone over, and Lieutenant Willis halted and called the sergeant to him.

"I guess, after all, Buffalo Bill was mistaken, sergeant, and the redskins were too anxious to get away to make a halt and ambush pursuers."

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant, for it was military courtesy to agree with his commander.

"I will push on at a better gait than we have been going, for the two scouts must be well ahead now, and—"

"There's Brazos Ben now, sir," and the

sergeant pointed to the scout, who was coming rapidly toward them.

"No; it is Cody, and on the flank that Brazos Ben started on. He has made a complete circuit."

"Yes, sir, and rides as though he had news."

"Ho, Cody, how did you get to our left?" called out the lieutenant, as Buffalo Bill came up at a swift gallop.

"Flanked around, sir; but you must halt here, or in good position for a fight, for the Comanches are ambushed little over a mile ahead, and have been reinforced."

"By Jove! but you were right! I was just going on at a trot, getting tired of this snail's pace."

"It is well that you did not, sir, for you would not have suspected the ambush until you were fired upon, and there are all of two hundred Indians there."

"I saw them from their rear, for I rode at a good pace, felt sure I had passed them, and so obliqued to the left to cross their trail. I did not cross the trail of those we were following, and that showed that they had halted; but I did cross the trail of a band equal the other in size, coming this way."

"Ah! then we are in for it."

"Perhaps so, sir, if they move back, now they have a large force; though they may remain there, hoping we will advance to-night or to-morrow."

"If reinforcements came, we would."

"Dot Driver has reached the fort, sir, by this, so that by midnight your troop should be here, and I hope there will be more, for we could catch those reds in a trap worse than they have set for us."

"I had better send a courier back to hurry on reinforcements, and if only my troop has been sent to push on to the fort to request of Colonel Kane a reserve, for there may be still more Comanches on the warpath."

"I think there are, sir."

"I will send a man at once. Corporal!"

The corporal advanced at once.

"You are well mounted, so go with full speed back over the trail, present my compliments to the officer commanding the reinforcements, and ask him to push on here with full speed, you guiding him, as after dark he cannot see the trail."

"Yes, sir."

"Ask him, also, to send a courier back to the fort, requesting Colonel Kane to be good enough to order a reserve force to our aid, as Buffalo Bill reports several large bands of Comanches on the warpath, and we are held in check by some two hundred."

"Yes, sir."

"And, lieutenant, I am sorry to report, sir, that Brazos Ben has been killed or captured."

"This is too bad, indeed."

"How did you discover it, Cody?"

"I flanked around to meet him, sir, and came upon his trail, and there was evidence of a struggle there, and blood-stains."

"The tracks of several Indian ponies were there, and all, with Ben's horse, led off toward where the Comanches were in ambush, and I followed as near as I dared, and reconnoitered their position."

"Report this also to the colonel, corporal."

"Yes, sir." And the corporal was away at a rapid gallop.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BUFFALO BILL'S COUNTERPLOT.

Having seen the corporal off for aid, Buffalo Bill said that he would look up a camp, and one which would also serve as a stronghold to fight from, for it would never do to let the Indians discover that they had retreated.

A spot was soon found—the end of a ridge which broke off in a cliff, and where the rocks and pines—the latter most dense—would hide the force of the soldiers and shelter men and horses well.

The animals were all led to a stream near and allowed to drink their fill, the canteens were filled, and a lot of grass was cut with the men's sabers to feed to their horses.

Then the command went into camp and

began to roll rocks into position and thus strengthen their little fort.

Lieutenant Willis placed his men well, and then Buffalo Bill suggested that another man be sent to the ford to guide the command then on the way directly to their position, which, in the darkness, the corporal might pass.

A trooper was at once given his supper and started back for the ford, just as the sun reached the horizon.

"I will go out as soon as it is dark, sir, and reconnoiter," said Buffalo Bill.

"Better stay here, Cody, for you can discover nothing more," answered the officer.

"My idea was, sir, if the colonel sent more than your troop, to guide them around to the rear of the redskins' position, so as to attack there while your men moved up from the front, the Comanches, supposing they were all the soldiers they had to deal with, being thus caught between two fires."

"A good idea it is, too. I hope more than my troop will come, though, of course, that takes the command out of my hands, and I was hoping to get a chance to make a successful fight with my own troop."

"You have the satisfaction of knowing that you made a good fight at the ford, at least I look upon it as a most important battle won," said Buffalo Bill, with a smile.

"True, we saved you. But the Indians stampeded without a fight."

"I'm hunting promotion for services rendered on the field, Cody, and you bet I don't wish to be retired before I get stars on my epaulettes."

"You'll get them, sir, if pluck and ability count for anything, and dash also; but it is getting dark, so I'll have my supper and go, and it will be well to keep your men on the watch, as I might run against an Indian arrow, and they do deadly and silent work, you know, sir."

"Yes, but I don't look for you to die by a redskin's hand, somehow, Cody, and you know you wear a Death Charm that will protect you."

"I had forgotten it, sir."

"Brazos Ben is gone; you were spared. I tell you, I begin to believe in your Death Charm."

Buffalo Bill ate a good supper, and, leaving his horse in camp, went off on a scout on foot.

Thus the hours passed away, the lieutenant himself keeping guard with the sergeant, while the men slept.

He knew that if attacked, with only a score of men to beat back two hundred or more Comanches, the fight for life would be a desperate one.

Suddenly a form stood before him, and he started, for he had heard no step approaching.

It was Buffalo Bill.

"Lieutenant Willis, they are coming to attack you, sir."

"Well, Bill, we must give them the best we know how."

"I have been very near their camp—see, sir," and he held up the war-bonnet, blanket and weapons of a Comanche.

"There is no need of asking in regard to the health of the former owner, Bill."

"He is on the trail to the Happy Hunting Grounds, where he came very near sending me sir."

"I did not see him until he spoke to me in the Comanche tongue, which I never studied at school, he thinking, in the darkness, I was a comrade."

"I answered him so that he could not understand, got close enough to get a grip on his throat, and my knife did the rest."

"They are all at the place where they intended to ambush you, sir, and they have been reinforced by another band, so there are all of four hundred braves to fight."

"I saw by their movements that they knew you had a small force, and as you did not advance they were coming to attack you, so it will be well to have a little firelight, so as to mark your position for them and for the command coming, while, of course, you could retreat, sir."

"I wouldn't retreat if there were a

thousand of them, Cody," was the determined reply, and he added:

"And you would not advise it?"

"No, sir; not with reinforcements coming, for your position here forms a base to act upon."

"But with no help at hand, I would say retreat."

"Well, we'll fight it out here."

"I was going to say, sir, that I would go out, and, mounted, meet the command, and, if only your troop, explain fully the position."

"A good suggestion. But if more than my troop?"

"I would suggest that I lead the main force around to get on the trail and ambush the Indians, as they intended to trap you."

"Then, when half of the troop comes to the rescue, the Indians can see their force, and will still fight, until others come to set them in retreat, when you will follow rapidly and rush them upon our ambush."

"Cody, you should wear army blue and epaulets, instead of buckskin and a sombrero, for you are a natural commander."

"Yes, that is the plan to win, so go and carry it out. I only wish I was in full command."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BATTLE IN THE MOONLIGHT.

Buffalo Bill rode away from the little camp quietly, having cautioned the sergeant and the men not to go to sleep, but each one to be on guard, as their gallant young officer was.

He took the back trail, going at an easy canter, and had ridden several miles when he came to a halt.

His keen ear had caught a sound ahead.

"They are coming," he muttered. "Yes, there are more than the lieutenant's troop along, as I hear by the hoof treads—yes, there is artillery, too."

"Now, Mr. Lo., we will give you a surprise party you will not soon forget—ah! There go the rifles back at the camp, that show the lieutenant is at it."

"I will flank around and come up in the rear of this command, or some fool soldier might shoot me for an Indian."

With this he drew out of the trail, and waited until the force had gone by, when he rapidly overtook the men.

In a short while he was up with the advance and a halt was at once called, the scouts, with the corporal and the soldier sent to the ford, being in the lead, were sent after and turned back.

Buffalo Bill found the lieutenant next in rank to Lieutenant Willis in command, and he had the balance of the troop, some fifty men, along.

Besides these he had other junior officers commanding twenty and thirty men each, making all of a hundred troopers along, while there was also sixty mounted infantry, detachments from different companies, with three light guns also.

"I have about two hundred men, Cody, and I tell you this is junior lieutenants' gala time, for I am in command until we strike Lieutenant Willis, for the colonel was determined the boys should have the honor and credit of this fight, even if we get licked," said Lieutenant Guy Manning.

The officer in charge of the guns, the one in command of the mounted infantry, and the lieutenant who commanded the other troopers all came forward now and heard Buffalo Bill's story of the situation.

They could also hear the cracking of rifles back at the camp as Lieutenant Willis stood at bay with his men, and they were anxious to press on.

As Lieutenant Willis was the ranking officer, Buffalo Bill explained the plan of attack, giving him the credit of it, and the arrangements were rapidly made.

The troop of the young commander was to advance in two parts, the second to have one gun with it.

They were to advance slowly, only going to the rescue if it was deemed those at bay were being overwhelmed, and the second relief was not to come up until

they wished to drive the Indians in retreat.

The rest of the force, the two squads from different troops, the mounted infantry, and the remaining two guns, something over a hundred men, Buffalo Bill was to guide around to take a position of ambush, to strike the redskins upon the retreat.

The scout had found a good trail around through a valley, the way he had gone, and he could lead the force then at a double quick, but he first suggested to Lieutenant Manning that the artillery wheels be wrapped with blankets, the trace chains, sabers, and all that would jingle be also "muzzled," as he expressed it.

This was done with a will, for the cracking of the troopers' carbines told that they were being hard pressed.

Then the command divided in three forces and moved forward.

When he had advanced near to the little handful of heroes at bay, the lieutenant could hardly refrain from dashing at once to the rescue, Lieutenant Guy Manning having gone in command of the larger force to ambush the redskins.

But he knew how important it was, to strike a severe blow to the Comanches, for the flanking command to get into position to hit them hard upon their retreat, and so he held back the order to advance, to give them time.

At last, when it seemed that the fire of the carbines was growing weaker, he gave the order to march, and a moment after, to the wild notes of a bugle, the troopers were dashing to the rescue.

A faint cheer greeted them from the little band at bay, and the Indians, for a moment, were staggered.

But they rallied to measure their force, and finding that they were only some forty troopers, they formed to give them battle.

The bright moonlight revealed, too, that they greatly outnumbered the soldiers, and Comanches are hard Indians to drive with the slightest show of advantage.

Mounting their ponies they formed in line of battle, to advance up each side of the hill, where Lieutenant Willis and his men still held their position, and which was the bone of contention, for about that hill lay a number of dead and wounded warriors.

When he saw that more help was needed, the lieutenant in charge gave the bugler orders to sound the signal for the reserve to come on.

It was done with a dash, for the six-pounder let the redskins know of its presence by a burst of flame, a roar and the crashing of a shell into the very midst of the Comanche horsemen, just as they were advancing, as they supposed, to an easy victory, after which they would still capture the hill and the little band that had so bravely fought them back.

CHAPTER XXV.

TRAPPING REDSKINS.

The roar of the six-pounder was the first intimation that Lieutenant Willis had that other than his own troop had come to their rescue.

They had not been surprised by the Comanches, a hundred of whom had sneaked up to the attack on foot, for they had discovered them when within range, for the moon had just risen upon the scene, a little too soon for the hostiles.

The score of carbines had been fired as a volley, and, in sending the couriers back the lieutenant had retained their weapons, these were also ready for use, along with the repeating rifle taken from the fugitive soldier, Ois.

The Comanches had met a deadly check in their pedestrian advance, and were so cut up and demoralized that the horsemen who were to follow had to halt in their charge.

This gave the soldiers time to reload, Lieutenant Willis, who was using the repeating rifle, telling them not to overdo it in their haste, but to fire deliberately and only when sure of their men.

So hot was this first fire that the Comanches retreated to cover, mounted warriors and those on foot, and at once began a hot duel with carbines against Indian firearms and bows and arrows.

Another charge was soon made of all the Comanches mounted, but the soldiers threw not a shot away, and the hill proved too steep for the ponies to dash up, so again the redskins were forced back, though some had even reached the camp, and a chief, rushing upon Lieutenant Willis with his lance, had it struck up with his saber and was killed by a terrible cut of the keen blade.

Then followed another duel of carbines against bows and arrows, the Indians reserving their ammunition, for not a fifth of them were armed with rifles.

It was with sorrow the brave officer saw that his men had suffered, for four had been killed, several more were too badly wounded to fight, and others had received more or less severe wounds, yet still stood at their post.

"Courage, men, for Buffalo Bill will soon come with aid, and they hear the firing and know we are fighting for life against big odds," he said, in his cheery way.

Then suddenly the firing of the Indians ceased, the wildest yells were heard, and, seeming to realize that their foes had suffered, they again came forward for revenge and victory.

"Fight them, men, and die right here," cried the lieutenant, and even as he spoke the notes of a bugle were heard, a loud cheer, and Troop A of the "fighting—th" dashed into sight in the moonlight.

The Indians halted in the moment of success, it seemed, but, taking in the numbers of the relief, as has been said, rallied to fight them back.

But when the six-pounder chipped in with a roar, the shell bursting in their midst, and still other troopers came into view, the maddened redskins sullenly fell back to cover, hoping yet to win.

But the six-pounder was beautifully handled, the shots roared rapidly, the shells, splendidly aimed, burst in the very center of the red horsemen, and spread death to braves and ponies around, while the whole force of troopers began to advance, firing their carbines as they did so, and were joined by the remnant of the little band from the hill.

"Bravo, my good friend Birney! You were just in time and saved us. Where is Manning?" said Lieutenant Willis, addressing the second lieutenant of his troop.

"Speak it in a whisper—he has gone to give those red gentlemen a surprise upon their retreat, and Buffalo Bill guides them, as you ordered," answered Birney.

"As Cody suggested, though."

"Who commands, Birney?"

"You do now, sir."

"But there are other officers here."

"You rank all, for Manning is the ranking officer with the other force—the colonel said the boy commanders should have a chance."

"God bless him! But what is the combined force?"

"Something over a hundred cavalry, sixty mounted infantry, and three guns, a twelve-pounder and two six-pounders."

"Then we will make Mr. Comanche hunt his village in great shape."

"Is there a surgeon along?"

"Two, Bannock and Dale."

"Good! Send them to the hill yonder, which will be our base, and we will drive the reds too fast to give them time to halt to fight," and, having gotten his command well in hand, Lieutenant Willis moved forward in fine style, fighting as they advanced and driving the Indians sullenly before them, for, still outnumbering the troopers, they would not retreat rapidly, and their fear of the six-pounder alone forced them on, or they would have halted and fought it out there.

But they had in their minds a spot where they could rally and administer a severe blow to their pursuers, and that was in the canyon where they had been

lying in ambush to entrap Lieutenant Willis' small band.

So the chief gave orders to make the stand at the canyon, pretend to stampede there and pass through, and then, in the darkness of its shadows, to turn upon their foes and ride them down.

They planned well, but as those in their advance reached the canyon, two red flames shot out from its depths, the roar of the two guns was heard, and the steady rattle of the mounted infantry sounded their death knell.

They had been entrapped.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DEATH CANYON.

Buffalo Bill was a tireless rider when going to a rescue or a battle, and he found Lieutenant Guy Manning a willing follower.

The result was that the troopers went along at a trot, the mounted infantry followed, and the two guns and their caissons were kept close up, no matter how rough at times the trail was.

The command was yet half a mile from the position the scout had in mind, when the heavier firing told them that Lieutenant Birney had been forced to go to the rescue of his superior officer, even though they should not gain the position they hoped to reach.

So on they dashed, until Buffalo Bill held up a warning hand to go slow.

They had flanked the canyon, coming out beyond it, and at once the column was formed, the two guns well up in advance, to fire should they be attacked by redskins who had remained there.

But the canyon was deserted, and the force was quickly formed by Lieutenant Manning, the guns in position, the infantry dismounted and upon either side, and the cavalry in the rear, ready to charge.

The horses had been ridden hard ever since leaving the fort, but they must not be thought of when human life was at stake.

The firing from the camp had increased, and as it grew nearer, all knew that the redskins were retreating, and would soon come into the trap set for them.

Buffalo Bill had explained to Lieutenant Manning the nature of the ground in approaching the canyon, a level meadow being in front with a high hill beyond, so, if fired low, the shells from the cannon would not strike in the ranks of the pursuing soldiers, and the infantry was also ordered to fire low.

Soon there came a dash of a hundred red horsemen, seen plainly in the moonlight, across the meadow.

They were riding ahead to take position for their comrades to pass into the canyon, and rally upon them.

They were within a hundred yards of the canyon, when Lieutenant Manning gave the order to fire.

The two guns flashed, their roar sending a hundred echoes dashing back from the rocks, the infantry fired volleys by platoons, and the red horsemen stopped as though they had run against a cliff, staggered, reeled back, and men and horses went down by the score.

In the midst of their confusion, the main force had descended into the valley, and other shells burst among them, while, with another volley from the infantry, word was given to the cavalry to charge.

As the bugle sounded, like an echo came an answer from another bugle, far away, and it, too, sounded a charge, and Lieutenant Willis and his troopers rushed forward then for a telling blow and revenge.

Dazed by the surprise of the ambush, stampeded by the guns, cut down by the fire of the infantry, the Comanches, ever cruel, merciless and savage toward their foes, saw that their cunning had been overmatched—that they were between two deadly fires, and they thought no more of fight, but of flight.

They could escape only by taking to the heavy timber on either side of the meadow, and thence over the hills beyond.

They dared not wait a moment then to carry off dying or dead, as was their custom, but stampeded for life.

Many a pony had gone down and left his rider afoot.

Many a rider had fallen from his saddle and left his pony free.

Some of them were seized by braves on foot, but a number of the latter were hemmed in and were forced to surrender, a bitter thing for an Indian to do.

"Take all the prisoners you can, for I will leave their dead and wounded in their keeping," had ordered Lieutenant Willis.

Thus was the battle won in the early glimmer of dawning day.

The sun arose to light up a sad scene, for half a hundred dead and wounded Indians lay upon the field, some two score more were prisoners, silent, savage and revengeful, and back over the trail from the hill, where the little band under Lieutenant Willis had fought so well, warriors lay dead and dying, and many a horse also dotted the way.

Nor had the soldiers escaped unscathed, for men in blue had fallen, never to rise again, and others were more or less seriously wounded.

A show was made of a pursuit, with two small forces of cavalry, but the order was given to go into camp on the meadow, for there ran a small stream, and while the larger number looked to the dead and wounded, the Indian alike with the pale-face, others cared for the tired horses, built fires and prepared breakfast.

The two surgeons were sent for with all haste to come to the new camp, and they soon arrived, along with the supplies and a couple of ambulances.

Wounded twice in the fight when at bay, Lieutenant Willis would not give up, and gave orders that the Indians should be cared for along with the soldiers, and the prisoners given plenty to eat.

Then, turning to Buffalo Bill, he said:

"We owe this to you, Cody, for it was your victory."

CHAPTER XXVII.

BUFFALO BILL MYSTIFIED.

"I was but an humble means to a glorious end, sir, for this lesson will save many innocent lives of settlers, as it will teach the Comanches that we can strike a hard blow when needed. The victory, Lieutenant Willis, was won by you, your officers and men."

Such was Buffalo Bill's modest reply to the praise bestowed upon him.

"Well, Cody, I'll get a great deal of the credit, but you deserve it, and I shall tell the truth, though it dims my glory."

"Now, how do you feel about a long ride?"

"I am ready, sir."

"Well, there are too many wounded to care for, too many dead to bury, for us to get away to-day, and even before noon to-morrow, and our return march will be very slow, so I am anxious to let the colonel know the result of the expedition, and you must bear the news."

"I am ready, sir, as soon as your report is ready."

"I shall simply request you to make the report, that is all."

"This is a compliment, lieutenant, I could hardly expect."

"It is due you, Cody, and I wish you to tell the colonel just what you know, from your coming across Private Otis, and our rescue of you, to the fight at this canyon."

"Tell him that my list of dead numbers nine, divided between the artillery, infantry and cavalry, that it is supposed Scout Brazos Ben is also slain, and there are some forty wounded, several seriously, a few severely, while the Comanches lost heavily, were badly beaten, and I have over a score of prisoners, with as many more wounded, and some fifty ponies captured."

"In fact, you know what to say as well as I do, and add that every man did his duty nobly, while the officers accomplished all that was expected of them, and that is saying a great deal."

"I shall, upon leaving here, leave the wounded Indians in care of the prisoners, supply them with provisions, and leave them for their comrades to come after, treating them all most kindly, to show

that we war only against those who strike at us."

"Now, get your breakfast, Cody, and start, for you can reach the fort easily before night."

"Oh, yes, sir, and I'll be off in half an hour."

As Buffalo Bill rode out of the camp he was greeted with a rousing cheer, which he returned by waving his sombrero.

Back over the trail he saw how stubbornly the redskins had retreated, and reaching the hill there was every indication of how desperate had been the fight there.

At an easy canter he continued on his way, and as he was following the trail, which ran a quarter of a mile from the scene of his desperate battle in the open grave, on its way to the ford, he glanced in the direction of the spot, and, impelled by some impulse he could not account for, he wheeled his horse in that direction.

As he neared the spot, a surprised look came over his face, for he could not but believe his eyes, and there he beheld that the grave was open.

He drew rein suddenly and gazed down into the grave, a number of coyotes scattering at his approach from their feast upon the dead horses.

He had seen that grave filled up the day before, the bodies of the chief and warrior he had had with him and others slain in the fight having been put into it.

Then the dirt had been thrown in, the grave had been rounded out, and several logs taken there by the soldiers and put on top to prevent the coyotes from tearing up the bodies.

Now the logs had been thrown aside, the dirt taken out, the bodies removed, and the grave was empty as when he had first found it.

Buffalo Bill was surprised and mystified.

Where were the bodies of the dead Indians?

He looked all about for them, but they were not to be found.

Had they been removed by other Indians?

At first he believed so, but then he saw that the opening of the grave was not the work of redskins.

The work had been clean and thorough, not a clod or shovelful of dirt being left in the grave.

He saw, too, that there had been a trail left from the grave to the river bank.

It showed that some object, or objects, had been dragged along there and thrown into the river.

He then knew that the Indian dead must have been exhumed, dragged to the bank, thrown into the river, and allowed to be carried away by the current.

But, for what reason?

That he could not answer, and try as he might, the mystery of that grave being again open was unfathomable to him.

"If I was not under orders, I'd camp here and solve the secret," he muttered.

But, feeling that he could not lose more time, he turned to the grave, threw one of the logs into it, then covered it over with dirt, and, mounting his horse, rode away.

Crossing the ford, he urged his horse into a steady canter, and went on his way more and more puzzled about that grave, and it was nearing sunset when the flag floating over Fort Taos came into view.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SCOUT'S RETURN.

When the sentinel reported that there was a horseman coming rapidly toward the fort, and soon after that it was Buffalo Bill, a general gloom seemed to settle down upon all in the fort.

Why should Buffalo Bill leave the command except under circumstances of direst necessity? was the question that went from lip to lip.

There were many women and children in the fort, the families of officers and some of the men also, and they shared in the general suspense and dread, for there were husbands, fathers, brothers and sweethearts out with the boys in the field.

The colonel was calm, but anxious, and waited in his quarters with his adjutant for the scout's arrival.

He had entrusted a large command to McKenney Willis, an officer under thirty, but known as one of the best commanders in the army for his years.

He was full of dash, and though personally reckless, was most cautious of lives entrusted to him.

Full of ambition, he was the first volunteer for every deed of danger, and he had the name in the Northwest, where he had served for years, of being a clever Indian fighter.

For a year at Fort Laramie, he had been post adjutant, then assistant adjutant-general and aide; so he had had experience in handling quite large bodies of troops.

So the colonel had trusted him as commander in the field with the little army.

It had caused criticism and growls from superior officers, of course, but with Willis in the field, and doing good work, from the report of the courier, he did not wish to send an officer who ranked him to take his honors from him, unless he was forced to send still other men.

So it was that he had selected the junior officers, with detachments from their commands, thus sending men from every troop, company and battery at the fort, while, should aught happen to Lieutenant Willis, there was another officer Colonel Kane could rely upon in Guy Manning.

But the coming of Buffalo Bill alone to the fort, so soon after the command had left, seemed to foretell defeat.

"Of course, Captain Irving, with Cody with the command, I felt that Willis would have a very able adviser, for I would not hesitate, had it to be, to place Buffalo Bill in command of several thousand men in the field, and I have known of campaigns where, had the commanding officers taken his modestly-given advice, the result would have been far more successful, and redounded to their credit instead of having a disaster to shoulder," said Colonel Kane.

"Yes, sir, Cody is a born soldier and an able commander, and as Willis has not got the big head, he would not only take his advice, but ask it," answered Captain Irving.

"True, and I hope having this command did not swell his head, as you put it," returned the colonel, with a smile.

"I'll vouch that it did not, sir; for Willis, with all his dash and personal recklessness, is ambitious to win promotion, and mistakes do not gain that desired end."

"No, Colonel Kane, I am not at all worried, with Willis, Manning, Birney and Buffalo Bill in the field, and I may add Scout Dot Driver."

"Yes, he is another good one. But, hark! the men are cheering Cody as he enters the fort," and going to the window, the two officers saw Buffalo Bill coming at the same rapid gallop up to headquarters.

His horse was in a foam, but did not appear broken down, and as he sat upright in the saddle, Buffalo Bill carried his sombrero in his hand, answering the cheers that greeted him all along with the waving of handkerchiefs from the ladies and the shouts of the children, for the first courier to arrive had reported the desperate fight of the man as he stood at bay in the open grave against fearful odds, and he had written himself down a hero with all at Fort Taos, that kept up the name he had won elsewhere.

Throwing himself from his saddle, Buffalo Bill advanced toward headquarters, the sentinel, with a sly glance around, to see if he was seen, giving him a salute of "present arms," an honor the scout quickly acknowledged, while he said to the colonel's orderly:

"Don't look so blue, orderly, for your brother is all right."

"Thank God, sir."

"Walk right in, sir, for I announced your coming to the colonel."

"Ah, Cody, glad to see you back."

"Are you just from the command?" And the voice of the colonel was unmoved while he grasped the hand of the scout and

looked piercingly into his face to read there disaster or good news.

"Yes, sir, I left the command at nine o'clock this morning, in what you may know as Ironsides Canyon, and I have the honor of being selected by Lieutenant Willis to bear to you the news of a grand victory.

The two officers almost cheered at the good news, and Colonel Kane shook hands with the scout again, as did also Captain Irving, and warmly congratulated him upon his return.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SEEKING INFORMATION.

"Well, Cody, I congratulate you, and it is an honor to be the bearer of such news.

"Lieutenant Willis then fulfilled my expectations of him, I am glad to know," said the colonel.

"He more than did so, sir, as did every officer and man of the command, Lieutenant Willis desired me to say; but I regret to tell you that the victory was dearly bought."

"Tell me of it, Cody."

Buffalo Bill did so, the adjutant writing notes of his report as he told the story.

From the time of Lieutenant Willis' rescue of him to the battle at Ironsides Canyon, how it was planned and carried out, the scout told, with not a single reference to himself, other than that he had discovered the supposed death of Brazos Ben, and had guided the men under Lieutenant Manning around to the canyon.

"Well, Cody, I have enjoyed your report immensely, but from the way it was told you seem to have simply been an eye-witness of all that took place."

"I was there, sir."

"Doubtless, and for that reason I suppose Willis sent you as the bearer of the news to me; but what you did I suppose he will have to tell me."

"I had the honor of acting as aide, sir, as well as scout and guide."

"Yes, and a valuable aide you were. Beyond all doubt. But though our losses were heavy, your report of what the Comanches suffered is proof that the fighting was terrific, and the lesson will keep the Indians quiet for a long time to come, while the treatment of them by Lieutenant Willis I fully indorse, as it is most humane, and will show them that we do not seek revenge against them, only strike when we must.

"This fight, too, will make a captain of Willis, young as he is, for his captain has been retired, as I have just received word, on account of continual illness, and the battle was fought just in time for the senior lieutenant to be considered in the list of promotions.

"Now, Cody, if you are not too tired, I will hear your report of your scouting expedition, for, from the looks of your left breast, you appear to have struck a gold and diamond mine," and the colonel, and likewise Captain Irving, had their eyes fixed upon the badge which the scout wore.

"Yes, sir; I struck both; but pardon me if I do not take this off and show it to you, as it was pinned on by one who told me I was to wear it, as a Death Charm."

"A Death Charm?" And the colonel and adjutant examined it closely, the former remarking: "I should think it would prove to the contrary, as its great value would tempt lawless men to kill you to get possession of it."

Buffalo Bill laughed and replied:

"You shall hear how I got it, sir, when I report the result of my scouting, and though I do not believe in superstitious happenings, Colonel Kane, it is a remarkable coincidence that I have had my life four times spared, miraculously, so I may say, in three of the instances, since I have worn this Death Charm."

"Your life appears to be a charmed one anyhow, Cody, from all I have known of you. But tell us about this most valuable Death Charm, so we may judge if it has virtues, or your proverbial good luck has helped you."

In his low-voiced, quiet manner, Buffalo

Bill related the story of his strange adventures, ending with:

"Now, colonel, I returned to the fort to get better posted about this country and its people. Of course, I have a map, a perfect one I have found, which you gave me, and the scouts advised me well in every particular as far as the lay of the land was concerned.

"Then, too, I have been able to find out much for my own benefit; but I was not aware that the El Cobras dressed in a representation of snake skins, I did not know that they dared to roam at will in small bands about the country, and I had no idea that the ranches were as close as they are to the Indian country and had such large herds of cattle.

"Then, too, I was not told of this old hunter, Panther Pete, and when I expected that the people of the ranches would be a hardy set, ignorant and rough, I met a Lady in Velvet, splendidly mounted and equipped with costly saddle, bridle, and trappings, and beautiful and refined, while a gentleman rides half-frozen into my camp, who says he is a ranchero, and a more courtly man and handsome fellow it would be hard to find anywhere."

The colonel and adjutant had listened with intense interest to all the scout had to say, neither addressing a word to him to break the thread of his story.

Then the colonel said:

"We were most anxious about you during that blizzard, being fearful you, having come from the northward, would not know what a norther was down here, and I was sorry I had not informed you what you might expect."

"I was prepared for it, sir, for I go ready for what may turn up."

"Now to your most remarkable meeting with this mysterious woman?"

"Yes, sir."

"She it was who gave you this badge?"

"Yes, sir."

"Dressed in blue velvet, you say?"

"She was, sir."

"Then it was the woman known as the Queen of the Gold Trail, Cody."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE QUEEN OF THE GOLD TRAIL.

Buffalo Bill repeated after Colonel Kane:

"The Queen of the Gold Trail, sir?"

"Yes; it could have been none other than she."

"Pardon me, sir; but who is the Queen of the Gold Trail?"

"Ah! you don't know?"

"No, sir."

"You were right to come back for information, for I never thought that you might be ignorant of our people here, though I should have done so. But let me tell you that you had in your grasp, so to speak, a woman upon whose head a price is set."

"It hardly seems possible, sir."

"It is true, however."

"That would mean that she is a criminal?"

"It is just what I mean, Cody."

"Can it be the one to whom I refer, sir?"

"Very beautiful, black hair, and eyes fringed with long lashes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Teeth of pearl, as the poets say, and a rich, well browned complexion."

"That is the description, sir."

"A superb form, and dressed in riding-habit of blue velvet, trimmed with gold braid?"

"Gold and silver braid, sir."

"Small hands, with gauntlet gloves covering them?"

"Just so, sir."

"A black horse—a splendid animal—and a saddle and bridle ornamented with silver and embroidered, while she carried a revolver in a saddle holster, a gayly-covered serape rolled up under the cantel of her saddle, and another in a belt about her waist?"

"That was the woman, sir."

"She was about twenty, say?"

"About that, sir."

"And spoke English with a slight accent?"

"Yes, sir."

"Captain, show Cody the printed description of his Lady in Blue."

The adjutant turned to a drawer, took out a paper, and handed it to Buffalo Bill, who slowly read it.

It was a complete description of the Lady in Blue, and she was spoken of as the Queen of the Gold Trail, while there was a reward of five thousand dollars offered for her capture.

"But what has she been guilty of, sir?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"She is the fair decoy, the spy, the real leader, it is supposed, of the worst band of outlaws that disgrace the frontier. In other words, those known as El Cobras," replied the colonel, sternly.

"I only wish I had known it, sir, I'd have roped her in," was Cody's emphatic rejoinder.

"I only wish that you had, and there I am at fault for not having posted you thoroughly."

"You know it now, however, and yet you may never cross her path again. Every one who does not know her as she is, is sure to meet her, but though time and again men have sought to gain that reward, they never see her."

"She has captured a dozen mule trains with ore, and has held up the coaches time and again, as also army and emigrant wagon trains, while she has pounced down upon the settlements and mining camps, at least her men, El Cobras, have, and many believe that she is really the leader, for few can say they have ever seen the outlaw chief known as Captain Cobra, and it is thought she does the planning."

"A most dangerous woman, I should say, sir," Buffalo Bill responded.

"And one whose career should be brought to an end, for she can be very dangerous."

"She has been, if all reports are true. But what kind of a fellow was it who came back at night to kill you?"

Buffalo Bill described the outlaw.

"It might have been the chief, Captain Cobra."

"He did not strike me, sir, as the leader, except of that band."

"Well, he is out of the way, at least, and you deserve a great deal of credit, Cody, for your fight with him, and also for saving the woman from a most frightful death."

"It was the work of my horse in both cases, sir."

"Ever modest, Cody."

"Can I ask, sir, if you know of this old hunter, Panther Pete?"

"Yes, the scouts have reported him to me scores of times as having been seen all about the country, even in the Indian country."

"What is there about him, may I ask, sir?"

"He is an old recluse, a hunter for pelts, and sells them at a good advantage, I learn, for he is a taxidermist as well, and understands well how to tan the skins. He comes to the fort here now and then for supplies, and has made several reports of Indian uprisings. That is all that I can tell you of him, Cody."

"Thank you, sir; but of the ranchero I met, Taylor Travis?"

"I know him, for now and then he has stopped at the post, and he has a ranch, is a bachelor, and is more fond of gambling, I hear, than of anything else. But I hear him spoken of as a square man, a gentleman in manners, and one who has had a number of personal encounters, in which it was always the other man's funeral."

"And those of the officers here who know him like him very much," added Captain Irving.

"And now, sir, may I ask what was the largest number you ever heard accredited to the band of outlaws?"

"As high as sixty—as low as fifteen; but in my opinion, two dozen would hit nearer the truth, and these are divided into several bands, with a common retreat and one leader."

"Mostly Mexicans, I take it, sir."

"Yes; with Americans, too, and I guess the world in general is pretty well repre-

sented in its nationalities. Whatever they are, they certainly are a bad lot, and should be wiped out, so go ahead, lay your plans, and call on me for all the help you need."

"No one knows, sir, where the Queen of the Gold Trail has her retreat?"

"No; but find it, for I have hopes that you can."

"I will try, sir, and now I can return to my work well posted about those I am to hunt down," and Buffalo Bill went to his quarters to secure much-needed rest.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AGAIN IN THE SADDLE.

It was noon of the day after his return to the fort that Buffalo Bill was ready to start again upon the trail of the El Cobras.

He had had a good night's rest, and arose refreshed and ready for work; but the colonel sent for him, and the two had a long talk together, so the scout put off his going on the trail until after dinner.

The colonel had particularly wished to see the scout in regard to the papers he had left with him, which had been given Buffalo Bill by Private Otis.

The colonel told him that there was some hope of Sergeant Eckford's recovery, but that it would not, of course, be wise to make known to him for some time the nature of the papers, which proved, in fact, that the sergeant was a missing heir to a fortune, and Private Stanley Otis was to inherit it if the real heir was proven to be dead.

The whole plot of the lawyer and Stanley Otis was revealed by the papers, and upon his recovery, if he did recover, the sergeant would have to ask for a discharge from the army, which, under the circumstances of his serious wound, would doubtless be granted, the colonel said, so that he could enjoy his inheritance and bring the attorney to justice.

"I shall make no move in the matter, Cody, until the sergeant is pronounced out of danger, and then it is for you to break the news to him, and tell of the death and confession of Otis."

Continuing, the colonel said:

"Now to your going on this hunt for the El Cobras?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have here some despatches for Lieutenant Willis, also letters for him and those in the command that arrived the night of their departure, so first seek his camp and deliver them. Willis has also seen this Lady in Velvet, as you call her, and has been to Panther Pete's cabin, while he has been upon several hunts after the outlaws, so have a talk with him upon the subject, and what advice he gives you will be good. If you need any of the scouts with his command, take them with you."

"I prefer to reconnoiter at first alone, sir."

"You are the best judge of that, but, as I said before, command me for all the aid you need, for I picked you out as the man to accomplish this work, and I am sure that you can do it."

"Thank you, Colonel Kane; but there is one thing I did not tell you about last night, but will do so now."

"Well?"

"It is in regard to that newly-dug and open grave on the river, and which served me so well as a fort."

"Which served Lieutenant Willis so well as a burial place for your redskins, too?"

"Colonel, when I came back by there the grave was empty again."

"After, you told me, Lieutenant Willis had buried the Indians in it?"

"Yes, sir."

The colonel looked surprised, and he felt certain that Buffalo Bill was impressed by the fact that the grave had been opened.

"And the bodies?" he asked.

"That is the strange part of it, sir, for had it been opened by Indians to get the bodies of their dead comrades, they would have taken them away, leaving not a trace, if possible; but from the grave to the river there was a track that showed

plainly, at least to me, sir, that the bodies had been dragged there and thrown in."

"Might the Indians have done that, rather than have their dead buried by pale-faces?"

"It has been my experience, sir, that no Indian would thus dispose of his dead, and I think the Comanches are not exceptions to the rule."

"But another strange feature of it all, sir, was the fact that the grave had been cleaned out of every particle of dirt, every clod, as though to receive a body, and who would have done this, save for a purpose known only to themselves, sir?"

"It is too deep for me to fathom, Cody."

"But you better go and have another look at it, to see if it was intended for any one else."

"I will, sir, for when I left I tossed in a log and covered it over, making certain marks that would betray the presence of any one coming there during my absence."

"Well, if you find out more regarding it, notify Lieutenant Willis, so that he can inform me upon his return."

"I will, sir," and Buffalo Bill left headquarters and went to his own cabin to prepare for his departure.

When he had come to the fort from the Northwest, he had brought with him two splendid horses, one already so well known to the reader.

But this one he had decided to give a rest to, and so rode away from the fort upon the other animal.

If anything, he was a better animal than the one he left behind, somewhat larger, certainly fleet, and perfectly trained, for the scout never kept watch while he was scouting on this horse, and camped for the night in dangerous quarters.

Well prepared with blankets, camp equipage and supplies for a couple of weeks, Buffalo Bill left on his second "still hunt," with firm confidence that he would make some discovery before return that would enable him to tell the colonel more than was yet known about the El Cobras.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE EMPTY GRAVE.

Buffalo Bill left the fort with the expectation of finding Lieutenant Willis and his command encamped near the ford, and spending the night with them.

In this he was not disappointed, for, he covered the thirty miles to the river by sunset, without in the least distressing his horse, "Pard."

The command had just gone into camp, the wounded having been taken there by trains, after the Indian plan, and the guards were set, the horses staked out, and the camp-fires were ablaze, forming a picturesque and stirring scene along the river bank upon each side of the ford.

The soldiers greeted the scout with a cheer, and as he rode up to Lieutenant Willis' tentless camp, that officer, wearing his left arm in a sling, for his wounds were more serious than he at first supposed, called out:

"Ho, Cody, back again, are you?—and glad we are to see you."

The other young officers greeted the scout also most warmly, for all were anxious to know just what the battle with "cub commanders" was thought of by Colonel Kane and others at the fort.

"Just in time for supper, Cody, at our mess, and a few minutes to tell us the news before the tocsin sounds," cried Lieutenant Willis, the same cheery fellow he was when he only had the weight of a troop upon his broad shoulders, instead of what all were pleased to call his "Army."

Buffalo Bill took out his despatches and handed them over, and then the large bundles of letters, which were at once distributed.

"Well, this is handsome, gentlemen, and no mistake—listen to this!" called out Lieutenant Willis, and he read aloud the communication from Colonel Kane, which was most flattering to his vanity, and praised one and all of the officers for their "grand victory, which will do more to keep the Comanches in check than any battle fought with them in a

score of years, and fought, too, under the leadership of the junior officers of my command. Their clever handling of their men, conspicuous courage and dash, from the gallant commander to those of lesser rank, have all been told me by the esteemed bearer of the reports, an honor he most richly deserved, and who, with a kind word for every officer and man, forgot to speak of his own well-played part in the action."

Such a letter from the colonel, coming to them upon the field, was received by all with cheers, and many wished that they only had another Indian fight on their hands.

"But it's no use, Cody, to wish for it," said Lieutenant Willis, as Dot Driver went out with several scouts under him and found that the Comanches had fled as though it was a case of devil take the hindmost; "but I sent a couple of the prisoners to report that their wounded would be left in camp for them to come after and their dead for them to bury, while our surgeons had cared well for them, and I left ample supplies, but no ponies save those the messengers rode away on."

"I will go by to-morrow, sir, and see if the Comanches came back in force after them, for if they did not it will show that they were cowed by their whipping and dared send only a few braves."

"A good idea, and where do you go then?"

"On a hunt I wish to talk to you about, sir."

"Certainly, but take Dot Driver with you to-morrow to bring back word about the Comanches, for I would like to know, and the colonel would, I am sure."

"I will, sir, but after supper I would like to ask you to go up the river bank with me, sir, to the grave where you found me."

"Certainly; we will have light enough, for the sun has not yet set."

Supper was soon ready, and a good one it was, for Spurs had excelled himself, as all the officers in the command had been invited, and were politely requested to bring with them their own tableware for the occasion.

Buffalo Bill enjoyed the meal greatly, and, being a special favorite with Spurs, his plate was kept constantly "loaded" until he had to openly admit that he was not the commissary wagon.

After supper Lieutenant Willis and Buffalo Bill set out on foot up the river bank for the empty grave.

On the way the scout told the officer that the bodies had been taken from it, and how he had put the log in and thrown dirt over it.

The sun was just sinking beneath the horizon when they reached the grave and both gazed eagerly down into it.

"It is empty again," was Buffalo Bill's surprised remark as he saw that the log had been removed, and also every particle of loose dirt.

"There is some mystery in this that is beyond me," he said.

"And I cannot understand it, Bill."

"I'll give it another try," said the scout, and he added that he would again replace the log and throw considerable dirt in upon it.

The lieutenant offered to send some soldiers up with shovels and wholly fill in the grave, but this Buffalo Bill declined, as he wished to keep it a secret that it was so mysteriously kept empty.

When the work was done as the scout wished, he spoke to him about the Queen of the Gold Trail and asked him about his having met her.

"Oh, yes; I met her, Bill."

"I had gone to Santa Fe by coach, and was returning pretty well stocked with purchases I made there, and found that I had as a fellow passenger a very beautiful young girl."

"Thinking she was some officer's daughter on the way to the fort, I spoke to her, and we got very chummy, I assure you."

"I told her of my purchases, and

showed her a few of the trinkets I had bought; in fact, made a fool of myself to a perfect stranger, for the coach was held up by a band of El Cobras, and I showed fight, killing one of them in defense of the beautiful girl, when, as they would have dragged me from the coach and knifed me, she interfered, told me my punishment should be the loss of my purchases, and, mounting a horse they led up, she rode off at their head, taking with her the things I had bought in Santa Fe, all snugly stowed away on a pack horse the outlaws also had with them.

"I tell you, Cody, it almost upset my faith in woman-kind," and the lieutenant laughed.

Comparing notes, Buffalo Bill was assured that it was the same Lady in Velvet he had met, and then got considerable information from the lieutenant about the robbers, their plans of robbery and supposed haunts.

When the command pulled out of camp the next morning for the fort, Buffalo Bill and Dot Driver rode away on the trail toward Ironsides Canyon.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BRAZOS BEN

Dot Driver had it in his face that size didn't make the man, that he was one to tie to, and would be on hand when wanted.

Buffalo Bill read this in looking at him, and as they rode along together, the little scout, glad to be on a trail with the famous King of the Borders, said:

"See here, pard, I've got two reasons for going to this Indian camp."

"Yes, Mr. Cody?"

"One is to see if they have already moved their wounded and buried their dead, and the force they bring to do so will prove if they are afraid of another attack if they have a number of warriors along."

"I had not thought of that, but it's just what it would show, if they sent only a few, that they wanted to keep off another attack."

"Yes, and to my other reason, for I did not give it wholly."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, Brazos Ben may have been wounded and then taken captive. If seriously wounded they would not have sent him on to their village, but waited to carry him with the braves who had wounds."

"That's the way to look at it, sir. If he was captured unhurt they would still keep him with them, to try and use as a hostage if they got into a tight place; at least that is Sioux, Pawnee and the style of the Indians further north."

"It's Comanche, too. You've got 'em all down, Mr. Cody, and I guess redskins are all alike."

"Now, my plan is to scout as near their camp as we can. It is in the meadow, in the edge of the timber, if there yet, and we can take the ridge around and reach the high cliffs at Ironsides Canyon, and my glass will pick out every Indian in the camp."

"They'll be near enough to see with the naked eye, sir."

"Well, we can leave our horses on the ridge and go on foot to the cliff."

"You mean to pick 'em off?"

"Oh, no; I mean to rescue Brazos Ben."

"If he's there."

"It is my idea that he was taken back to the camp with those who went to escort the wounded and dead on to the village, for they would take their dead along also."

"I may be wrong, but I think he is there."

"But we left some dozen warriors in camp, who were not wounded, and at least double that force will be sent back after them. You don't think we can get Brazos Ben away from that many, sir?"

"I do, if we go the right way about it."

Dot looked at Buffalo Bill in amazement, mingled with admiration.

Then he said:

"I'm with you, sir, if I lose my scalp lock."

Buffalo Bill smiled, and said:

"Strategy will often accomplish, Dot, what force cannot."

"That's true."

"I wish to show the Indians that the hated pale face has something of the fox in his nature and can out-Injun Injun."

"I don't see how it's to be done, but here I am, what there is of me, so just say the word, Chief Cody."

"I notice that you have a bugle there."

"It's a cornet, sir, but it's all the same."

"I have been told that you used to be bugler to the Sixth Cavalry?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know all the calls, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I intend that your bugle shall do the work, so let us push on rapidly now, to get to the camp before they leave it, for I do not know this country and cannot pick out as good a place ahead of them as is the Ironsides Canyon."

"I'm with you, sir."

With this they rode on more rapidly, Dot wondering just what little game of bluff the Chief of Scouts was going to play upon the Comanches.

But desperate as a rescue of Brazos Ben looked to him, somehow, as he looked at the calm, daring face of Buffalo Bill he had full faith in him, and believed he could accomplish what he undertook to do.

Lieutenant Willis had told Cody how he had tried to negotiate terms with the redskins for Brazos Ben.

He had offered to release the prisoners in return for Ben, but the cunning braves knew that they would be set free, and they to a man said that they knew nothing of the scout's capture or being killed.

With this, as they stuck to it, Lieutenant Willis had to be satisfied.

"I believe you speak Comanche, Dot?"

"Yes, Mr. Cody; I could teach the Comanches how to talk it," answered Dot, who did speak it well, having been a prisoner for a year among them.

"I know only a few words, so, if you had not been along, would have tried my Spanish on them, for many speak that language."

"Do you expect to get within talking distance of them, sir?"

"Yes, within whispering distance; but here is the ridge, so, as you know the country, lead the way to the cliff that looks over into the meadow."

This Dot did, and, leaving their horses soon after, they went to a point where they could see and remain hidden.

"The camp is there, Dot."

"Yes, and they are just breaking up."

"We have no time to lose, so see if we can find Brazos Ben."

"Yes, indeed! There he is, tied on the back of a pony!" cried Dot, excitedly.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DESPERATE STRATEGY.

Buffalo Bill swept his glass over the camp and said:

"Yes, I see him distinctly, and the poor fellow appears to be wounded. They are preparing to leave, for their wounded are being put upon trains, and their dead are already strapped on the backs of ponies."

"You see how many there are, sir?"

"Yes, the two messengers Lieutenant Willis sent brought back about twenty braves and a lot of ponies, for besides the wounded I take it there are some thirty able-bodied redskins."

"Just about, and their sending so few shows that they had had fight enough, and were anxious to get their wounded and prisoners away without much more trouble."

"And in that is our strong point. Now, Dot, do you know a way down into the canyon from these heights?"

"Yes, sir; I've been down it."

"Lead the way."

Unhesitatingly Dot obeyed, and in ten minutes the two scouts came out into the canyon, a hundred yards below.

"Dot, do you think the Comanches know what a white flag is?"

"You bet they do, for they have played it upon us time and again as a bluff for deviltry."

"We'll play it upon them now as a bluff for good."

"I'll use my handkerchief on this stick."

The handkerchief was soon tied upon the end of a stick, to make a flag of truce, and then Buffalo Bill said:

"Get your bugle ready and come on."

"All ready, sir, though I don't just see your little game."

"I hold a handful of trumps, Dot, with this flag and your bugle, and I'm playing to win."

"Here goes, for I follow your lead if they roast me."

"It's desperate strategy, Dot, I admit, but it's for humanity's sake, to save poor Ben from a roasting."

"Good!"

They advanced cautiously through the canyon until they came to a point where they could see across the meadow into the timber.

"They are just moving, Dot."

"Keep out of sight when I step into view, and sound a parley."

"When I call you, leave your cornet behind and come with me. Play the parley as though you were backed by the whole United States Army. If we have to retreat, we'll climb that steep path like mountain sheep and run first to our horses, and they cannot catch us."

"Oh, I see! This game ought to win, for it is such a bold one!" cried the delighted Dot.

"Are you ready?"

"All ready, sir," and Dot placed the cornet to his lips without the tremor of a muscle.

The head of the column had begun to move, a chief in the lead, then a couple of braves, next Brazos Ben, with a warrior riding on each side of him, and the wounded on trains following.

Bringing up the rear were a number of ponies bearing the dead braves, and there were many of them, and as a guard behind came a score of warriors.

The column stretched out some two hundred yards, and Buffalo Bill calmly waited until they had all left the timber and were well out in the meadow, not six hundred feet from where he stood.

Then he stepped into view, and began to wave his white flag, just as Dot, in clearest, thrilling notes, sounded a parley.

The column halted as though they had been fired upon.

There were braves who surged back upon others, and a stampede seemed imminent, when Buffalo Bill boldly advanced, waving his white flag with one hand and holding the other up above his head.

The Indians stood spellbound, while the notes of the cornet rang through the canyon, for they were certain that they were entrapped.

"Come," said Buffalo Bill, and, laying aside his cornet, Dot boldly kept his word and followed.

The redskins knew him at a glance.

But he, too, advanced with upraised hands.

The braves all huddled together, glancing uneasily in their rear as though they were sure they were hemmed in, and they prepared to fight to the death.

But Buffalo Bill half turned to Dot Driver, when he had gone about half the distance toward the Indians, and said something in English in a loud tone.

Instantly Dot raised his voice and interpreted in the Comanche tongue:

"The great white chief of Taos says that your braves were on the warpath, that he sent his soldiers and you tried to kill them from behind rocks, but his warriors gave yours a terrible beating."

"When many of your braves surrendered they were not killed, and your wounded were cared for by the pale-face medicine men, and not put to death."

"They were fed, and your dead were not scalped and cut to pieces. The young

white chief treated you as brothers, and he asked you for the white captive you had taken.

"But your braves spoke with a crooked tongue, they lied to him, and said they had not captured him nor killed him. The young white chief knew that your braves lied. So he sent to the great white chief at the fort for more soldiers. He was determined to make you give up your prisoner, or he would march upon your village.

"The soldiers are here, there, everywhere, and in your midst is the pale-face prisoner.

"Give him up. Let him ride to us, with his arms untied, his weapons returned to him, and upon his own horse, or one as good if his horse is not there. When he is free, you can go on your way unmolested. The white chief will draw off his soldiers, and when the shadow reaches the trail there, you can go, for no shot will be fired upon you.

"Refuse, and the white braves will cut you down without mercy."

CHAPTER XXXV.

CODY PLAYS THE GAME TO A FINISH.

Dot had done his work well.

Buffalo Bill in thunder tones had said in English just what he was to repeat in Comanche, and the little scout, after each effort of his leader, would interpret in clear ones that every brave should hear distinctly every word as uttered.

The Comanches were uneasy. They cast furtive glances around them, and when Dot had finished interpreting Buffalo Bill's speech, they did not reply.

They talked in low tones among themselves, and intuitively Buffalo Bill read why they hesitated, for he called out, Dot interpreting:

"Do not think the pale-faces are fools and will stay here to talk, while your braves are lying in ambush ahead on the trail, and will advance soon to rescue you.

"The pale-faces know that you expected they would follow you, and thus march into an ambush, but the white chief is no fool, and your warriors are now retreating toward their village.

"Answer me, is the white captive to be given up, or shall I shake my head so that the white chief can see, and let him send the wheel guns to crush you, and his mounted warriors to ride you down.

"Let the red chief speak, for the pale-faces are growing angry."

Only too quick, then, came the reply, showing that Buffalo Bill had hit dead center in saying that their braves were in ambush on ahead, hoping that the soldiers would follow and thus run into a trap and enable them to get revenge for their defeat and losses.

"The white chief has spoken, the Comanches are not fools, and there have been bad medicine and death enough in their village without letting more of my braves die in an unequal fight.

"The pale-face captive is free."

So said the chief, and having repeated it to Buffalo Bill, Dot Driver added:

"Ben is coming, but he is still bound, has no weapons, and is riding a wretched little pony; but let it go at that, so that we get him."

"No!" roared Buffalo Bill.

"We make the terms and they shall live up to them," and he shouted in angry tones:

"The Comanche chief is a fool to play with me. Does he think my soldiers will allow an insult to their chief?

"I said that the pale-face captive should be given up on his own horse, his own saddle and bridle, his weapons and his arms and feet set free by them. My young men are getting angry that the Comanche chief plays with them.

"He is a fool."

These stirring words were shouted out by Dot Driver, who was tickled almost to death at the grand bluff Buffalo Bill was playing.

Then the chief replied that the captive's horse was not there, nor his weapons.

Quickly Buffalo Bill shouted back:

"Ho, Brazos Ben, is that so?"

They would have stopped him, but were not quick enough, and Brazos Ben answered:

"The chief has my weapons, and my horse is here, also."

Buffalo Bill turned and shouted in English toward the canyon:

"They treat us as dogs and will not—"

But Dot Driver checked him with:

"It is all right, for the chief is scared to death now!"

The Comanches were greatly excited, indeed, for the chief had fairly tumbled off of his horse, to get rid of the weapons of Brazos Ben, whose horse was now brought up at a run from the rear.

It could be seen that there was still some hitch, but Brazos Ben called out:

"It's all right now, for they have found my saddle, bridle and lariat."

These were put upon the horse, but not fastened, and Brazos Ben, it was seen, had the use of but one arm, so he came forward on foot.

His horse followed, and as he drew near to Buffalo Bill the latter said:

"Pass on into the canyon.

"Go with him, Dot, and show him the path up the cliff, you riding his horse around to where ours are on the ridge, and lose no time about it, either, for a volcano will burst out soon in this region."

The two scouts passed on, leaving Buffalo Bill standing there alone.

But he called out something to Dot Driver before he disappeared in the canyon, and, turning, he shouted back in the Indian tongue:

"The Comanche chief has acted well. He is a great warrior, with a wise head. When the shadow of yonder cliff touches the trail, the Comanches can go on their way to their village, for the white soldiers will be gone."

Then Dot Driver disappeared, and pointing significantly to the shadow that was slowly approaching the trail, Buffalo Bill waved his hand and slowly turned and walked back toward the canyon.

Once out of sight of the Indians and his movements lost their dignity, for he bounded along until he came to the break in the cliff, up which the trail led to the heights above.

Far through the canyon he saw Dot on Brazos Ben's horse, going rapidly to make the circuit to the cliffs, and running up the trail he overtook the wounded scout near the top.

"Come, Ben, let me help you, for you are wounded," and, putting his arm about him, Buffalo Bill gave him great assistance and quickened his pace considerably.

"The horses are half a mile back on the ridge.

"I will follow as soon as I have had a look from the cliff at our red brothers."

The look showed the Indians still halted on the meadow, but talking excitedly.

As the scout looked, however, the chief separated from the others and rode toward the canyon, though slowly.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FLIGHT.

"I could kill that chief easily, and that would teach them that the soldiers are not to be trifled with and keep them quiet, for the sun has not yet lengthened the shadow to the trail."

So said Buffalo Bill, and he half brought his rifle round for use.

Then he said:

"No; I wish to take no life, Indian's or outlaw's, that necessity does not demand it. They suspect something is wrong, or the chief wishes to see the force there is in the canyon, or get some terms, have a pow-wow or something. Well, he'll have to get a very powerful microscope to find even the photograph of a soldier in that canyon, or within fifty miles from here.

"He approaches as though he expected to run against a bullet; but he'll soon get there, and as Brazos Ben has really reached the horses by this time, I'll light out, too, before the picnic opens, for we'll

have to go slow with our pard, as he seems badly used up.

"Ta-ta, red brothers, I'll see you later," and though finding it hard to tear himself away until he had seen the fun of the redskins' discovery of how they had been tricked by two men, Buffalo Bill started off at a run along the ridge.

When he came in sight of the horses, Dot Driver had just arrived, and was aiding Brazos Ben to mount, but both greeted Buffalo Bill with a shout of welcome, which was broken in upon by a series of most diabolical yells coming from the depths of the canyon, half a mile away and echoing into a thousand voices.

"The fun has begun, pards, so we'll be off," and Buffalo Bill leaped into his saddle.

As they rode on they could hear the wild yells of the redskins, and Dot Driver said:

"I guess they have all gone crazy, and I don't wonder, when they know how they were played."

"Yes, my breath left me when Dot told me, when I asked where the soldiers were, that you had done it all, Mr. Cody, while he had done the bugle blowing and chinning."

"Those reds intended to have a picnic with me when they got me to their village, so you know what you have done for me," and Brazos Ben's voice quivered with emotion as he spoke.

"I am glad to find you alive, Ben; but how did they get you in their grip?"

"I did not see them until I got an arrow through my arm and another in my hip, while a lasso came over my head and yanked me out of the saddle."

"I fought hard, but one of them gave me a lance-thrust here in my arm, and another hit me over the head with his gun, and that settled it."

"They bound up my wounds, for they did not wish me to die, but to keep me for future reference in their village, where they would barbecue me."

"The two wounds in my left arm are awful sore, and my head aches, but I don't mind the pain now, and can only think of the game you played on those redskins."

"It is worth all I suffered to have seen it, and I was as badly fooled as they were."

"Talk about playing Injuns. We don't know the A, B, C, Mr. Cody."

"And just to think how Mr. Cody played for your horse and weapons after they were letting you go," said Dot.

"Why, it showed strength to force them to give all up, for if I had weakened ever so little, they would have been bold and demanded a pow-wow."

"I would like to have seen them when the chief went into the canyon to have a big talk, which meant that he was going to beg more provisions, and didn't see a soldier, and all of them could not find a fresh trail, save of Ben's horse."

"It was then they went crazy, as you said, Dot," and Buffalo Bill laughed at the picture that came to him of the enraged Indians.

Soon after he said:

"We have been riding a good clip for some miles now, and as soon as we get to a stream where the country is open, we will halt, and I'll dress your wounds, Brazos Ben, and give you something to eat, for you look hungry."

"I'm starved, for they have given me but one meal since I was captured."

"All right; we'll soon fill you up."

"They may be so enraged as to follow us, though they will not cross the river, I am sure."

"Unless it is the Jordan," suggested Dot.

"Yes, some of them will cross to the happy hunting grounds if they crowd us, and the thought now comes to me that the trick we have played upon them may so enrage them, to get even they may swoop down upon the settlements, so you had better push on to the fort, if you can stand it, Ben."

"Oh, I can stand it, sir, once I get something to eat and my wounds properly dressed; in fact, I can ride through now without a halt if you think best, Mr. Cody," said the plucky scout.

"No; we will push on to the camp of last night on the river, and then halt for a couple of hours, and then make a brisk ride to the fort, and tell Colonel Kane what I dread, and that it might be well to send a troop on a scout to the settlements."

"If we do not halt long at the river, sir, we can overtake Lieutenant Willis," suggested Dot, and this seemed to please Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ANOTHER VISIT TO THE GRAVE.

The river soon came into sight, and it was seen that smoke was still ascending from the campfires of the command the night before.

"Pards, I don't believe Lieutenant Willis got off very early this morning, for some of the wounded were in a bad way, and in that case he will only go half-way to the fort to-day, and you can overtake him easily," said Buffalo Bill.

As it was seen that all of the camp fires nearly were still smoldering, this opinion of Buffalo Bill seemed verified.

They had come at a brisk canter for miles, but the horses did not seem to feel it in the least.

No sign of pursuing Indians was in sight, and they all dreaded that this meant a hasty march to where there was a large force and a swoop down upon the settlements in revenge.

Brazos Ben was pale, his teeth were set, but he held on manfully, and soon the camp was reached.

"Get the horses out, Dot, to give them all the rest they need, and I will help Ben," said Buffalo Bill, and he lifted the wounded scout from his saddle as though he had been a child.

Placing a blanket on the grass, he told him to lie down upon it and rest, while he filled the canteens at the river and built up the fire near to cook a good dinner.

By this time Dot had unsaddled the horses and staked them out, and Buffalo Bill, with lint, bandages, and arnica taken from his saddle-pocket, set to work to dress the wounds of the scout.

There were four in all—a gash in the scalp from the blow with the rifle, an arrow wound in the arm, another in the hip, and the lance-thrust in the arm near the shoulder.

The last was the worst and most painful, but all were tenderly bathed, and then dressed with lint, saturated in arnica and bound firmly over the wounds, the lance-thrust requiring several stitches, which Buffalo Bill put in with a skill that caused Brazos Ben to say:

"You are a real surgeon, Mr. Cody."

"I have learned about wounds from personal experience," was the smiling reply, and he continued:

"I have been called on often by surgeons to assist, and in that way a man must learn, when he sees wounds so often dressed."

When the bandages were secure, Brazos Ben dropped off to sleep, and his two comrades began to get dinner.

In half an hour all was ready, and when Brazos Ben was called he expressed himself as able to walk to the fort, he was so much better and refreshed.

"My head has stopped aching, and the pain is far less, except that I am intensely hungry."

But Brazos Ben was made to eat sparingly, and then was told he could have another half hour for sleep, which he quickly took advantage of.

"He needs it, Dot, for he is badly off, and only his indomitable pluck keeps him up."

"You watch him and get the horses ready, while I take a little walk up the river," and Buffalo Bill set out to have another look at the mysterious grave.

"Well, if it hasn't been put in condition again, I am blind," cried the scout, as he saw that the dirt had again been thrown out, the log removed, and the grave was as it was when he first beheld it.

"I'd give a month's pay to get at the bottom of this mystery," he continued, and he at once set to work to put the log back into it and throw dirt over it.

"If I did not have to go to the settlements I'd stay about here and find out

who it is that keeps this grave in such good order for burying some one.

"But it was done either last night, while we were all yonder in camp, or to-day after the command left—no, last night, I should say, from the looks of the earth."

"Well, it will not do to remain and allow the settlements to go unwarned, should those Comanches really have it in their heads to strike a blow at the settlers."

"Let me see, from the map I have, I can reach the settlements by midnight, and the Indians would have further to travel and would hardly strike there before dawn, if they did not wait until the next night, not thinking we would suspect their design."

"Now to return and get the boys started for the fort."

He went rapidly back to the camp, and found Dot Driver all ready with the horses, while Brazos Ben slept soundly.

A call awakened him, and he arose, though with an effort, for his long ride.

"Don't fear for me, chief, for I am all right, only a little stiff and sore."

"If I made the rapid ride from the canyon, half-starved and suffering as I then did, I can easily go now the distance to the fort, for I do feel so much better," he said, as he saw Buffalo Bill's look of anxiety about him.

"All right; but if you give out, go into camp and let Dot go on and send an ambulance back for you."

"I have an idea you will catch the command within fifteen miles, and should an officer be sent back with a troop, say he will find me in the settlement. Now, good-by, pard," and, grasping the hand of each, Buffalo Bill saw them ride away on the trail to the fort.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HERDERS' RANCH.

Having seen his two pards started for the fort, Buffalo Bill took out his map and studied it carefully.

He had also asked both Dot and Brazos Ben many questions as to the country, trails, camping-places and distances, and with that knowledge of an unknown territory for which frontiersmen are famous, he started off on his ride as though he was not going into what was to him an unexplored land.

He saw the scouts cross the river at the ford, and then set off at a rapid canter, as though determined to get to the command as soon as possible, and he then quickened his own pace.

For a short distance he traveled by the same trail he had come to that point when returning from the scene where he had had his adventures with the Queen of the Gold Trail, as he now had no doubt that she was, and the outlaws.

Then the settlements had been to the southward, and now he had to bend away to the southwest, the Indian country lying about due west from where he then was.

According to what the scouts had told him, and his map, he had about forty miles to travel, and it was then in the middle of the afternoon.

He knew his horse was good for a hundred miles, if put to it for a day, and so he set a pace for him that would carry him some twenty miles by nightfall, when he would camp for supper and rest, and go the rest of the distance after dark, arriving in the settlements about midnight.

He camped at sunset, finding good grass and wood and water.

He ate a good supper, gave his horse an hour's rest, which he so much needed, and then, mounting, went on his way once more, keeping his course as unerringly as the ship steered by compass.

Over hills, through valleys, across streams he went, until at last he came out upon the open prairie.

A ride of several miles, and he saw lights glimmering ahead.

"Come, old fellow, there are rest and food ahead for you where those lights are," said the scout, and the horse quickened his pace without urging.

To approach a light across a prairie or desert, all who have done so realize how hard it is to bring it nearer; how, after traveling mile after mile, the light seems just as far away, like running for a beacon

at sea that seems to recede rather than grow closer.

But at last the lights grew brighter and the scout counted a score or more.

He knew that he had shaped his way well, and was coming upon the settlement of Herders' Ranch.

The place had been described to him—a group of log cabins extending for half a mile on each side of the stage trail, and with a river near at hand to the northward, fringed with heavy timber, and rolling lands beyond, protecting it from the keen northers to a slight extent.

The cabins were the stage station and hotel, post office, wagon and blacksmith shop combined, several stores and half a dozen saloons.

With a hundred dwellers in Herders' Ranch, all told, there were several hundred more of a floating population, consisting of rancheros and cowboys from the ranches within fifty miles around, miners from the nearest mines, Mexicans, Indians, negroes, and many who had no home, occupation or aim in life, as far as could be discovered.

Dot Driver had told Buffalo Bill to go to the saloon of a man known as Broadaxe Jack, one who had the best house in the place, and whose bar and gambling den were known as a square all-round place, to use the scout's paradoxical way of expressing it.

The man had gotten his name of Broadaxe from the fact that he had cleaned out a gang of desperadoes one night who had come there to hold up several rich rancheros who were gambling there, and to rob the place generally.

Having discovered their intention, Jack Tobin, as he was then known, had seized a broadaxe and sailed into the half-dozen desperadoes, striking right and left, killing two of them, mortally wounding a third, and cutting the hand off of a fourth before they knew what he was about.

As the other two fled in terror, they were shot by the crowd, while the man with the severed hand was lassoed and swung up to the flag-pole outside.

From that night Jack Tobin became renowned as Broadaxe Jack, and when he commanded order in his saloon his word was law.

To Jack Tobin's, then, went Buffalo Bill, and he found it wide open and well filled with its frequenters, who were gambling, drinking, singing songs and telling stories.

Entering the large saloon, Buffalo Bill was surprised to find in its interior some pretensions to a city bar-room.

There were a good bar, shelves for the bottles, glasses, decanters, boxes of cigars, and real tables and chairs for the comfort of the patrons.

In a bracket at one end of the bar was the terrible broadaxe, having printed upon its handle in red letters the words:

"Ready for use when needed."

With a quick glance over the saloon, Buffalo Bill descried, seated in the upper end of the room, an officer of the army whom he at once recognized, and he walked quickly toward him, his entrance attracting the glances of a number in the place by his striking appearance.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE TELL-TALE SCAR.

The United States officer whom Buffalo Bill recognized was Lieutenant Burt Balfour, of the —th Infantry. He had known him at one of the northern forts, and he knew him to be a fine fellow, brave, a genial gentleman and splendid soldier.

He was seated by himself at a table, and seemed busily engaged in taking in the scene in the Broadaxe saloon, and watching the faces of the people there, not noticing the scout until the latter said:

"How are you, Lieutenant Balfour?"

"By my star of good fortune, Cody, but I am glad to see you. Of all men Buffalo Bill is the man I wanted most to see just now, and only a short while ago you were in my thoughts."

"Sit down and order what you will, and tell me what brings you to this part of the country," and the lieutenant

warmly grasped the scout's hand and was indeed delighted to see him.

"I might ask you the same question, lieutenant, for we last met at Kearney, where you expected to remain for some time, I remember; but I am here from Fort Taos, where I am under special orders, and came here to-night on a duty of importance, which I will make known to you, while glad I am to find you here, sir."

"Well, to explain my being here, Cody, I will simply say that we propose and the powers that be at Washington dispose, and my command was sent to Fort Summer, while I am here also on a special duty, and you can help me in it."

"I am at your service, sir."

"I have a room at Jack Tobin's cabin, and if you are not settled, come bunk in with me, for there are two cots there, and we can have a long talk; but now to my mission here."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you see that man at yonder table, the one of the two this way?"

"Ah! I know the gentleman facing us, for he is Mr. Taylor Travis, a ranchero, whom I met some nights since."

"Yes, and I hear a good fellow, but I mean the man with his back to us."

"An out-and-out tough, or I'm mistaken."

"Yes, and he is the man I am after. The coach to Summer was held up last run, the driver killed and Captain Baring, of my company, badly wounded, and left for dead, while he was robbed of a large sum of money he was bringing through for the paymaster."

"The horses were left standing in the trail, and, by a miracle almost, they brought the coach over ten miles into Summer without a break, and with Captain Baring in it, and the dead driver on the box."

"Baring rallied under the surgeon's care and told me the men were outlaws, but not of the El Cobra band, and he thought from Herders' Ranch, or about it, for, believing him dead, they talked freely."

"There were five of them, and he described them, face, form, voice and peculiarities, so minutely that I felt sure I could recognize some of them, and so came here, giving out that the coach had been held up by El Cobras and a paymaster and the driver killed, while it was supposed that much money had been taken."

"I did this as a blind to let the men feel safe, and to-night yonder fellow asked me to play cards with him and I did so to study him. He won fifty dollars from me, but I am sure played with a pack of cards Baring told me was taken from him by the robbers, and which had a fancy back, which he described."

"The money he put up was crisp and new, taken from an unbroken package, such as Baring had with him. The fellow has two pards here, at least, for I noticed him signaling to two men, and he cheated me most cleverly in the games I had with him, though I could not catch him."

"Now, the two pals with him also answer to the captain's description, and I was wondering how I could get my grip on them when you came in, for you will help me?"

"You bet I will, sir. Just say the word."

"Then I'll describe the cards to you, and see if they are not the ones Baring lost, and if you think best, act, or back me up if I do."

"All right, sir. We'll finish up quickly, for there is other work to do."

"Then we'll take a closer look at the fellow," and the two arose and approached the table where Taylor Travis and the suspected robbers were gambling.

Both men were so intently engaged in gambling that they did not see the officer and Buffalo Bill, though Taylor Travis sat with his face toward them. He was neatly, even fashionably, dressed, though he wore a slouch hat, and his

white shirt and well-made clothes were in striking contrast to the costumes of the others in the saloon.

A handsome man he certainly was, with a face of conscious power and calm dignity.

As the lieutenant stepped just behind the suspected man, he started and gazed fixedly at the back of his neck, while he whispered to Buffalo Bill:

"See that scar on the back of his neck?"

"That betrays him, and he is the man."

CHAPTER XL.

BUFFALO BILL'S QUICK AIM.

"Captain Baring told me that the leader of the robbers had a deep gash on the back of his neck. He noticed it when he stooped to pick up his revolver."

So had said Lieutenant Burt Balfour to Buffalo Bill, and when they approached the suspected man from behind the officer had at once seen the long blue scar half encircling the neck of the fellow so intently playing cards.

There were the cards, too, that they were playing with, such as Captain Baring had described as having been taken from him, while the "stakes" piled up close to the left hand of the rough-looking gambler were crisp new greenbacks and gold.

The officer wore a fatigue suit, and no weapons were visible, but his jacket hid a belt of arms about his waist.

Buffalo Bill had entered the saloon just as he had been riding, corduroy pants, woolen shirt, top boots and slouch hat, and upon either hip was a revolver, and upon his left side a long-bladed bowie knife.

With his arms akimbo, the hands resting upon his hips close to the revolvers, he stood with calm face waiting for Lieutenant Balfour to act, his eyes upon a group of men near the door who seemed to be intently watching them.

At first Buffalo Bill seemed to feel that Taylor Travis had seen him, and for some reason did not recognize him, but then he thought how many passed to and fro, that the gambler's eyes were upon his cards, and glancing at the pile of money on the table, to his surprise he saw that the men were playing for very large stakes, for among the bills his eyes caught sight of a five hundred dollar note, several of a hundred dollars, and there were a number more in the pile that might be equally as high in figure.

"I shall act, Cody," whispered the lieutenant, and as he did Buffalo Bill pointed silently to the hand of the man at whose back they stood.

Wholly unmindful that they were behind him, they saw him slip a card from his sleeve and as he threw down his hand in a deft way and revealed what he had, Taylor Travis said, in a perfectly even tone:

"You have won, and are better off by a cool five thousand."

"No, Mr. Travis, keep your money, for that man cheated you," cried Lieutenant Balfour, sternly.

Both men sprang to their feet, but one looked into the muzzle of the lieutenant's revolver, and heard the words:

"You are my prisoner!"

"What fer?" shouted the man, savagely.

"Robbing the Fort Summer coach and for murder."

"It's a lie! Pards, I calls on you," roared the man, and the three who had been pointed out by the officer to Buffalo Bill as his supposed pals, came forward, one drawing a revolver and shouting:

"Yer blue coat and brass buttons don't go here, pard, for I down yer!"

That he intended to fire upon Lieutenant Balfour there was no doubt, but as his finger touched the trigger Buffalo Bill chipped in with:

"Hands up, pard! You are covered."

Either the man did not hear or did not heed, for his revolver flashed and the bullet cut through the lieutenant's cap.

But a shot followed it in a second of time, and the bullet from it struck the man just between the eyes.

"Hands up, there, both of you!" and Buffalo Bill confronted the other two men now, a revolver in each hand.

Their leader was held under the weapon of Lieutenant Balfour, their friend who had fired the first shot lay dead, Buffalo Bill held each of them under a weapon and Taylor Travis here called out:

"I'm with you, gentlemen, in this game, if they crowd you."

This was enough for the two men and up went their hands in token of surrender.

"Now, Lieutenant Balfour, you can make sure of your man," said Buffalo Bill, and, drawing a pair of small steel handcuffs from his pocket, the officer snapped them upon the wrists of his prisoner, while the scout asked:

"Will you iron those two, also, sir?"

"It would be as well, though I have no proof against them, other than that they fit Baring's description."

"Of what are they accused, sir?" asked Taylor Travis.

"Of robbing the Summer coach two days ago at Blue Stone Ford, sir," replied the officer.

"Of this man and the dead one I know nothing, sir, save your prisoner bantered me to play him to-night for a large sum and he won, though you say he cheated me; but these two men are cowboys on my ranch, and, though they may be friends of this fellow, I can vouch for it that they have not been out of my sight for several days past."

"Then they go upon your word, sir," replied Lieutenant Balfour.

"Thank you, sir."

"Go to the ranch and do not leave it again save with special permission from me."

"Go!"

The stern command the two men did not hesitate to obey, and they got out of the saloon with alacrity, over a score of those who were present now crowding about the spot and looking on with interest.

The moment the men had turned to go Taylor Travis stepped toward Buffalo Bill and, extending his hand, said, warmly:

"We meet again, my friend, and once more you have rendered me a service by preventing this fellow from robbing me, for you say he was cheating me."

"Yes, Mr. Travis, as this officer, Lieutenant Balfour, also saw."

"I did, sir, and more, the money he had staked is some of that stolen from the commander of my company, Captain Baring, as also the cards he was playing with—search him, Cody, and see if there is not more evidence to convict."

Buffalo Bill, with no gentle hand, threw open the man's shirt, and a murmur of surprise went up from the crowd as large packages of new money, a watch, chain, diamond stud, gold miniature frame with the likeness of a lady and two children, and a well-filled wallet were taken from him.

"The Government money and Captain Baring's watch and other belongings, with a miniature of his wife and children," said Lieutenant Balfour, impressively.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE ALARM.

With such telltale evidence upon him no one could doubt the man's guilt, and yet the fellow growled forth:

"Them was give to me by my dead pard thar ter keep fer him and ter play fer him."

"All right. We'll grant you are telling the truth, and try another test. The man who killed the driver of the coach, wounded Captain Baring and robbed him had a long blue scar half around his neck, and was called Sol."

"Here is the scar, and what is this man's name?" And the lieutenant, by a sudden movement, revealed the scar, and

as he asked the name of the man half a dozen voices called out:

"He is Sol Nichols, cap'n."

"There is no mistake, and Captain Baring can identify him. I only wish I had his fellow-criminals."

"This, then, is the money of the Government—permit me to return it," and Taylor Travis handed over the money taken from the table.

"Thank you, sir," and as Lieutenant Balfour took the money a man entered quickly and called out:

"Ho, men, what is the row here?"

"Ah, Tobin, I am glad you have come, for I have a prisoner for you to look after until morning, and a corpse to be buried."

"A man killed?" And the one whom the officer called Tobin advanced and gazed first at the prisoner, then at the dead man.

"I have expected you men would get into trouble; but who did the shooting, for it was a dead center shot."

"My friend, Buffalo Bill, here, killed him, and saved my life, Tobin."

"Buffalo Bill? You must be the man?" And Jack Tobin turned his gaze admiringly upon the scout.

"Yes, allow me to introduce you, Tobin, to W. F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill," said Lieutenant Balfour.

The two men shook hands. Broadaxe Jack seeming much pleased to meet the scout, for he said:

"I have heard more tales told of you than of any man on the frontier, and I'm mighty glad to meet you."

"Thank you, sir, and I will reciprocate the sentiment, for I came here to see you, Scouts Dot Driver and Brazos Ben telling me to look you up."

"When I arrived I came in here to find you and saw Lieutenant Balfour, so helped him in his capture of that man."

"But, let me tell you now that I came to let you know that the Comanches have been badly whipped at Ironsides Canyon by Lieutenant McKenney Willis, commanding a large force of soldiers from Fort Taos, and in revenge I believe the redskins will make a quick raid down upon this settlement and the ranches, perhaps striking by dawn, and maybe not until to-morrow night."

The words of Buffalo Bill created a decided sensation, and Jack Tobin remarked:

"Then we must be ready for them, and lose no time getting about it. You, Taylor Travis, go by four ranches on your way to yours, so rally the men at each and your own and be ready."

"There are men here, I see, from other ranches, so mount and go like the wind to give the alarm, all rallying on the settlement here, and I'll have the people here in the saddle and the captain can take command," meaning Lieutenant Balfour, "while you, Mr. Cody, will be with him, and I'll serve as aide, and you bet we'll strike them another hard blow, being ready for them, while, if they had surprised us, it would have been a cruel tale for those that escaped to tell."

"Let me suggest, sir, if you can lend me a fresh horse, and give me a couple of good men, who know the country thoroughly, that I go out and reconnoiter for them, in whichever direction you think they will come," said Buffalo Bill.

This plan was at once acted upon, Buffalo Bill riding away soon after with three good men, while Lieutenant Balfour established headquarters at the saloon and the men as they came in reported to him there.

Taylor Travis had gone off like the wind for his own ranch, where he had nearly a dozen cowboys, and to alarm the other ranches along the way, which could place under his command, all told, some thirty men.

"We can have two hundred good men in the saddle by daylight, ready to meet those redskins as soon as you report their coming," Jack Tobin had said to Buffalo Bill, as he rode away a few minutes after one o'clock.

"Four hours to dawn, lieutenant, so we'll be ready for them, thanks to the warning of Buffalo Bill, and what a dandy he is—handsome as a portrait, a splendidly-

formed fellow, and just such a man as one who has his reputation ought to be.

"But you asked me what about the prisoner and the dead man? Why, I'll lock the arm of Sol Nichols about the post there, and he'll be safe if he don't pull the shanty down, while the remains, which were Tim Nolan, will keep lying where he is, and maybe there'll be more to bury with him, after the Comanches have been here."

"Now, lieutenant, I run Herders' Ranch, so just command men, horses and guns around here same as they were your own, and the bar, too, the whole outfit is yours. But, my! I can't get over that being Buffalo Bill, a man I've wanted to see for a long time." And Jack Tobin called the men as they reported up before Lieutenant Balfour to assign to duty.

CHAPTER XLII.

BUFFALO BILL'S FEARS VERIFIED.

The two men who accompanied Buffalo Bill on his reconnoissance were thoroughly acquainted with the surroundings of Herders' Ranch for fifty miles.

They knew every trail into the place, and just the way the Comanches must come, when Buffalo Bill told them where he had left them, and about where the main force had been encamped.

About three miles out from Herders' Ranch there was a rise, the summit of which was heavily timbered, and at the base ran a large stream.

Reaching the summit, Buffalo Bill saw that there was a stretch of prairie beyond, extending for miles to the base of the mountains.

In this direction there were no ranches, no white dwellers, for it was too near the Indian country for a comfortable habitation.

The ridge spoken of was the boundary line for all ranches and settlements in that direction, and there were but three or four small houses between there and Herders' Ranch, all the large places lying below them, the settlement standing as a guard between them and danger.

The moon had risen when Buffalo Bill and his two comrades reached the ridge, and, halting in the shadow of the timber, he dismounted, took his field glass, and began to sweep the prairie with his vision.

The glass was a powerful one, a present to him from General Custer, and he could have picked out a horseman from a steer miles away in the moonlight with it.

"They should come into the prairie, sir, about where you see that dark shadow, which is a range of foothills this side of the mountains, and a spur runs out there well upon the plain," said one of the men.

"There is just where they did come into the prairie," replied Buffalo Bill, his glass still to his eyes.

"You see them then, sir?" cried both men in a breath.

"See if you do not?" and the scout handed his glass to the man nearest to him.

After getting the focus all right, he cried:

"You bet I see them, sir, and there is a crowd of 'em, too," and he gave the glass over to his comrade, who, after a short look, remarked:

"They are riding in double file, as near as I make out, and the column is half a mile long."

"Yes; between three and four hundred warriors, I thought. Now, tell me, coming from Fort Taos, where would a column of cavalry cross this prairie?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Do you see that high point away over here, sir, to our right?"

"Yes; that is where I came on my way to Herders' Ranch, if I mistake not."

"Yes, sir, it is, and the trail from Taos leads by that high point."

"And the cabin of old Panther Pete lies still further to the right?"

"Yes, sir, in that high range."

"Some fifteen miles from the Taos trail, sir," said the other man.

"And the coach trail to Taos goes by here?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Fort Summer lies yonder?" and Buffalo Bill pointed to the west.

"Yes, sir."

"All right. I've got the lay of the country all right now, so one of you had best ride with all speed back to Herders' Ranch and report to Lieutenant Balfour the exact situation, while the other goes with all speed across to the Taos trail and see if you do not meet a troop of cavalry on the march."

"If so, tell the commanding officer that I sent you, and you can explain the exact situation and guide him with all speed to this spot, for, beaten back from the settlement, the redskins will not think of pushing on up the line of ranches, and will retreat this way."

"I will wait here for the cavalry, and will be able to tell the commander just how many braves there are. Should they not come in time to strike this point, guide them along the foothills to ambush them there, and I will be there, too, when I see that you cannot get here. Do you both understand?"

The two men answered in the affirmative, and were off at a run, one going straight back over the trail to Herders' Ranch, the other along the ridge to make a wide detour on the prairie and get back to the Taos trail to head off the cavalry, which Buffalo Bill felt sure would come.

Led by Dot Driver, he argued, who had said he knew several cut-offs from where he and Brazos Ben would doubtless overtake the command, they would not have over ten miles further to ride than he did to Herders' Ranch, while, headed off at the foothills, they would have that distance much shortened.

It had been over two hours since he had arrived at Herders' Ranch, and Dot and Ben had been well on their way toward the command before he started.

"If they do not get here they can reach the foothills yonder, through which the Comanches must retreat, and, if so, it will be another Ironsides Canyon affair for Mr. Lo," muttered Buffalo Bill.

Then, as the head of the Indian column was within a mile of where he stood, he rode down the ridge for some distance, muzzled the nose of his horse to prevent his neighing, and went rapidly back on foot to a spot at the right side of the trail, up which he climbed and found a secure hiding-place.

CHAPTER XLIII.

TROOPERS ON THE TRAIL.

The man sent by Buffalo Bill to go on the Taos trail to meet the cavalry he felt sure Lieutenant Willis would send back, was a small rancher, living with his family not far from Herders' Ranch, and he was most anxious to obey orders.

He made a flank movement along the ridge until he came to a depression he knew of in the prairie, and, turning into this, rode rapidly toward the foot hills, well knowing that the Indians could not see him.

He did not spare his horse, and in half an hour was nearing the point around which led the trail the cavalry must come upon, when suddenly he halted, for there had come to his ears an unusual sound.

There was the tramping of hoofs in rapid motion and a jingling sound of spurs and steel striking against steel.

"Buffalo Bill knew his men—the cavalry are coming," he said, joyously, and spurred forward to meet them.

The cavalry was coming, indeed, and at their head was the gallant Willis, himself.

He had found that he must go at a slow pace with his wounded; there was no cause for hurry, and, sending one of the officers, who had a slight wound in his arm, on to the fort to report his cause of delay, he made a halt after going about ten miles.

There Driver Dot had overtaken him with Brazos Ben, the return of the latter being greeted with cheers by the whole command.

Telling Ben to go at once to the surgeons, for he was worn out and suffer-

ing, in spite of his saying he did not mind the ride, Dot Driver went at once to headquarters and reported to Lieutenant Willis just how Buffalo Bill had rescued the captive scout, and that he believed that the maddened Comanches would make a raid upon the settlement for revenge.

Lieutenant Willis at once called a council of his officers, and explained the situation, remarking that he should select an officer, sergeant, corporal and twenty men from each of the three troops with him and the company of mounted infantry, and one gun, and go at once on the trail to Herders' Ranch, leaving Lieutenant Guy Manning in command.

That he did not give his own troop the whole honor was appreciated by the others, both officers and men.

The horses and men of the different commands were picked, and within half an hour after the arrival of the two scouts the bugler sounded "Boots and saddles," and with cheers from their comrades who remained behind, the rescuers were on their way.

"Now, Dot, tell me again about this most desperate and remarkable rescue of Brazos Ben, whom the surgeons say is really badly wounded, considering all he suffered and his treatment," said Lieutenant Willis, calling Dot Driver to his side as they were upon the trail, for the little scout had claimed the privilege of going in spite of his long ride.

Dot told the story of the bold rescue by Buffalo Bill and himself, and the lieutenant, in spite of having heard it before, listened with the deepest attention.

"It was just like Cody to conceive such a daring plan, and you deserve great credit for having so boldly aided him, Driver. Cody has more than upheld his reputation for dash, daring and cleverness since coming to Taos, and the few who thought that he was overestimated by those who knew him in the Northwest will now have to acknowledge that he is truly the King of the Border."

"I wouldn't have believed it could have been done, lieutenant, but when Mr. Cody said go, I felt that confidence in him I never said a word, but obeyed orders with a sure belief we'd get there. And there sat poor Ben upon his horse, as much fooled as were the Comanches, and I'll never forget his look when I told him to climb the hill to the top, while I rode his horse around to where the other animals were."

"Now, Dot, going at this pace, how long is it going to take us to make Herders' Ranch?" asked the lieutenant.

"You'll halt half an hour for supper, sir?"

"An hour, to give men and horses a good rest, and I'll make it at sunset so as to find good grass and water. Then we must push on to Herders' Ranch."

"Well, sir, I say about an hour before dawn we'll reach the settlement, for I know one cut-off I can make to save five miles, and could make two more if it was not for the gun, sir."

"We'll quicken our pace, then, a little, for I do not wish to give up the gun, as it is a terror to the Indians, and we do not know just how many we have to fight, for they may have been reinforced from their village."

"That is true, sir."

"But you really have no proof of their intended raid, other than the belief in it of Buffalo Bill?"

"Well, no, sir; but I guess he's right, for the way they took Brazos Ben's escape was like a lunatic asylum broke loose."

"Of course, we thought they would follow us, sir, but that they did not proved that they had suddenly thought of a more devilish act to do that would even up their revenge."

"That is the Injun of it, Mr. Cody said, and I guess he knows. The more he thought of it, the more convinced he was, and when we talked it over Ben and I thought so too, and then he sent us to overtake you, or push on to the fort."

"I am glad he did, for I believe wholly in his judgment," responded Lieutenant Willis.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE SCOUT'S MESSENGER.

With horses very tired, the command under Lieutenant Willis rounded a towering spur of the foothills and came out upon the open prairie about an hour before dawn.

"Do you see that low ridge yonder, sir?" asked Dot, who was still guiding, dropping back alongside of the young officer.

"Yes, Driver."

"That is a timbered rise that crosses the prairie, sir, and is three miles this side of Herders' Ranch."

"Good! and how far from here?"

"All of six miles, sir."

"All is quiet toward the Ranch?"

"Yes, sir; for the Indians, if they came, and Buffalo Bill was sure they would, are on yonder ridge, resting for the pounce upon the Ranch just before dawn breaks."

"If they have not yet gotten here they are coming into the prairie five miles south of here, where there is a pass into the foothills, and so on up to their village in the mountains, sir."

"We could lie in wait for them there, but the settlers would not have a chance to aid us and make the victory more complete, and the Comanches must be taught to know that we are watching them and when they strike we will hit back harder."

"Yes, sir; but we can go into camp here, if you say so, sir, and be ready to close in behind them, while I can go on alone to Herders' Ranch and report your being on hand."

"That would be best, but is there a good camping place near here?"

"Yes, sir; a quarter of a mile back in the foothills—but there comes some one, sir!"

A horseman was seen approaching at a gallop, following the trail they were on.

The command was halted, just as they were filing out of the foothills, and a moment after the horseman dashed up and halted before Lieutenant Willis and the scout, who were well in advance of the others.

"Well, my man, are you from Herders' Ranch?"

"Some two hours ago, yes, sir, but now from the ridge, where I left Mr. Cody, the scout, who sent me to tell the officer in command just how the situation stands."

"That is what we wish to know, and I am Lieutenant Willis, commanding."

"I'm awful glad to meet you, sir, for there's a host of Comanches on the ridge yonder by this time, and moving on Herders' Ranch like a great big mountain snake."

"But, thanks to that great scout, Buffalo Bill, the settlement is ready and the ranch men are pouring into it rapidly, I can tell you, while there is an army of officer there, a friend of Mr. Cody's, who has command."

"Ah! Who is he?"

"I heard the scout call him Lieutenant Balfour, and he came over from Fort Summer to—"

"I know him, and he is a fighter and clever fellow. Is he alone?"

"Yes, sir; he came alone on a hunt for Sol Nichols, a gambler, who robbed the Summer coach two days ago, and killed the driver and wounded the paymaster, getting lots of money, as I understand it."

"He was laying for him, when Buffalo Bill came to the Ranch, and then there was a row, and the scout laid out a desperado who was going to kill the lieutenant, and they got the irons on Sol Nichols, too."

"I'll warrant Cody chipped in when needed," said Lieutenant Willis.

"Yes, sir; and his play was a trump card."

"Then he told Broadaxe Jack about the Comanches, and there was a scatter-

ing for men, while the lieutenant was to take charge and Buffalo Bill, a pard of mine and myself, came out to the ridge to hunt redskins."

"We found 'em, too, at least Buffalo Bill did, with his glass, and he sent my pard back to warn the Ranch, and told me to come on here and meet you, and say, if you was in time, you was to go on to the ridge and take position, but if not in time to get there, to follow the foothills around and go into ambush."

"Are we in time to get to the ridge?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where are the Indians?"

"About passing over the ridge now, sir."

"It is about three miles to the Ranch?"

"Yes, sir."

"And five from here to the ridge?"

"About that, sir."

"Then we go to the ridge, for we can get there in ample time. But where is Scout Cody?"

"I left him at the ridge, sir, and he was going to count the reds as they went by and then be ready for whatever he had to do."

"To the ridge we go."

"Lead the way, Dot, and set the pace, and you, my man, ride with me, for I wish to question you still more."

The command was again in motion, the horses having had a breathing spell of ten minutes, and Dot Driver was setting a brisk pace with the chance of a fight near at hand.

"How many men will Lieutenant Balfour have under him at the Ranch, my man?" asked Lieutenant Willis, as they rode on once more.

"All of a hundred and fifty, I should say, sir; perhaps more by the time the reds get there."

"And did Scout Cody form any estimate of the number of Indians there were in the raiding force?"

"He thought about four hundred, not less, and I guess he's right, sir."

"And I have a hundred men, about, so, as the Indians expect to surprise the settlement and are mistaken, and they will be caught between two fires, we will save the ranches and strike a blow that will cause wailing in the Comanche villages and command a peace for some time to come."

"Keep the pace up, Dot," and on the command went over the soft prairie at a brisk canter, artillery, horses and all.

CHAPTER XLV.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

Buffalo Bill was very particular in placing himself in a safe and guarded position in the tree from which he intended to take observations of the marching column of Indians.

He selected a stout pine, with heavy limbs growing close to the ground, and within ten feet of the trail.

He could distinctly see, in the moonlight, all who passed along that trail, and readily count them, for braves and ponies would go by within lariat distance, and he was some twenty-five feet up the tree.

Taking the precaution to cut down with his knife two small pines, about four feet high, he had swung them to his lasso when he climbed up, and when he had secured his position, he drew them up after him.

With the aid of the lariat passed around the trunk of the tree and the limb on which he was seated, he arranged the pines to look like small limbs, and to protect him fully from view, should an Indian halt beneath and gaze up in his direction.

He also arranged loops for his repeating rifle, and then was ready for observation.

The moon had risen some time after midnight, so was little over a quarter, but the skies were clear, and in that latitude it gave a bright light.

The scout had no more than gotten comfortable when it occurred to him that it would perhaps have been better had he been satisfied with a less thorough count of the Indians from a short distance away in the timber, and on foot, where he could retreat if he saw an inclination on the part of the Indians to halt there.

He recalled then that the redskins must have ridden rapidly, that there were certainly some stragglers, whose ponies could not carry them to the Ranch.

In that case, as it was by the ridge that they would retreat, either further up or down it, according to the ranches they raided, the stragglers might await there for the return of their comrades, for, as it would be broad daylight, they could see miles up and down the prairie and move one way or the other to meet them.

Of course, they could not but feel that the attack would be a complete success, for they would surprise and wipe out the settlement, and, mounted on fresh, captured horses, a large band could sweep in either direction upon the ranches, killing, burning, plundering, and running off stock.

The main force at the settlement could reap the success of their raid, sending plunder, cattle, horses and their dead and wounded back to their fastnesses, for, of course, they expected some few to be killed, but the many scalps they would take, and their captures would heal all wounds.

By night they would all have reached the foothills on their retreat, and before word could reach Forts Sumner and Taos and soldiers reach the scene, they would have reached their strongholds in the impregnable valleys of the mountains, where they would rejoice over their grand victory.

Such, Buffalo Bill realized, was the plan of the Comanches, and he smiled grimly as he thought of the surprise awaiting them, that the biter would be bitten.

But he did not smile as he thought that the Comanche stragglers might halt just about where he would have to remain upon the anxious branch, and when day dawned be surely discovered.

"I deserve to be shot for a fool for coming up here, and I guess that there is a fool-killer among those Indians who will do his duty," muttered the scout.

But retreat was impossible, then, for the head of the column was almost upon him.

He at once decided to carry out his intention of counting the Indians, and trust to getting away, for he said:

"I wear this Death Charm yet, and it must be a luck charm as well, for I saved Brazos Ben, then had the idea these redskins were going to do just what they have done, also saved Lieutenant Balfour and helped him rake in the robber of the coach. But here they are."

In the lead was a single redskin, in chief's war-bonnet, and fifty yards behind him came four braves.

Still fifty yards back rode a dozen braves, and following them was the head of the solid column.

They had closed up now to four abreast, and were led by two chiefs in full savage regalia.

The different bands, under chiefs, followed, and they were riding at a slow trot, for their ponies showed signs of fatigue, and the best of them were not good for many miles further.

Buffalo Bill at once forgot himself and began to count the Indians as they rode by.

They were some time in passing, the column kept well closed up, and they pushed right on for the few lights ahead across the prairie that marked where their goal was.

"One full chief, two next in rank, a score of under chiefs, and four hundred and forty braves. A pretty heavy force. Now for the stragglers, before I descend from my sky parlor, for I guess there must be half a hundred of broken-down ponies. Yes, here comes one now, and another, and another—why, the woods are full of them," said Buffalo Bill, as he caught sight of a long line of stragglers coming into view.

CHAPTER XLVI.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

"Just as I feared," muttered Buffalo Bill, when he saw the first straggler reach the ridge just beneath the tree and halt.

The brave quickly slipped from his saddle and gazed after the Indian column,

then well out on the prairie on its way to Herders' Ranch.

The rear of the column was fully a quarter of a mile ahead of him.

He turned and looked at his pony, that stood with nose almost touching the ground, completely used up.

Then another Indian rode up, his pony scarcely able to walk. He, too, halted.

Two more arrived, both walking and leading their ponies.

Then others straggled along, some mounted, others leading their ponies, and a number walking and without any horses to lead.

All halted beneath that tree.

The scout counted half a hundred of them, and still they continued to drop in, and all talked in low, but excited tones as they saw the lights of the settlement and knew that their comrades were nearly ready to strike their deadly blow.

They saw that they could not reach there, so they would remain there as a reserve, for so the chief in their midst commanded.

Then, when their comrades came back with plenty of horses they could mount them and guard the retreat.

"My education has been sadly neglected not to have studied Comanche," muttered Buffalo Bill, as he heard the braves talking beneath him, many of whom had thrown themselves down upon the pine straw under his tree, while the chief and others were silently watching the distant lights and anxiously waiting for the, to them, joyous sounds of the attack.

"Day will break in half an hour, and then I'll start for the happy hunting grounds," muttered Buffalo Bill.

A few minutes more, and there was seen a long line of flame shooting out over in the settlement, and the roar of a hundred or more rifles followed.

Every Indian beneath that tree was on his feet in an instant.

The attack had begun.

But rapidly, viciously, those rifles rattled now, and there were heard the cheers of pale-faces rising above the yells of the Comanches.

The Indians beneath the tree were as still as statues for a few seconds, and then from their lips came a moan that ended in a wail.

They knew what those cheers meant instead of the wild, exultant war-cries of their people.

They knew that their comrades had been surprised, when they had expected to surprise. They all looked to their chief.

He stood like a statue in bronze, his eyes fixed upon the many red flashes, his ears turned to the rattle of rifles, the deadly ring of the revolvers.

All the braves who had been best mounted had been given the rifles of their comrades whose horses had shown distress, and thus over half of the force had firearms to attack with.

The chief said something in a savage tone, and at once there broke forth a wild yell.

"Being on foot, they had better take the back trail and lose no time," muttered Buffalo Bill, and he glanced out over the prairie to see if more stragglers were coming.

None were in sight. All were doubtless up on the ridge, mounted and on foot.

But in that glance Buffalo Bill saw something that made him wish to tune up in one of his wildest, most effective war-cries.

What he wanted to do that for was because he caught the glint of steel in the moonlight.

He saw a dark mass moving over the prairie and coming toward the ridge.

The wind blew from the direction of Herders' Ranch, and was blowing fresh, so the sound did not reach the ears of the redskins on the ridge.

Had they not been so taken up with the fight at the Ranch, their keen ears might have caught the sound of clinking metal, or their eyes have seen the rays of the moonlight glimmering on steel.

But the scout saw, and he waited, thinking of the surprise to those very Indians, who, if there were any words of choice

profanity in the Comanche tongue, were using it to the best advantage in expressing their feelings.

Then, glancing again toward Herders' Ranch, Buffalo Bill saw that the attack had become a retreat.

The shots of rifle and revolver were rattling fast, but they were drawing nearer to the ridge, as the flashes and sounds plainly showed.

The Indians were retreating, but not in a stampede, for they were fighting back as they did so.

They remembered well the ridge.

They knew that over half a hundred of their comrades must be there.

They knew how splendid a place it was to fight back their foes.

They could hold it all day, and then, with ponies well rested, retreat at night, for it was now to save themselves only they thought of.

But suddenly the ears of the braves on the ridge caught the tinkling sound behind them, and, turning, they beheld the cavalry coming rapidly.

The troopers were not a quarter of a mile away.

With wild yells they broke and fled down the ridge, to make a flank movement and gain the foothills.

And as they started they heard a wild, terrible war-cry from the air, and bursts of flame were seen as Buffalo Bill's repeating rifle sent death from the top of the pine tree.

CHAPTER XLVII.

WAITING.

Buffalo Bill is over humane—has proven so in his long career as an Indian fighter. He would not pull trigger on an Indian save for imperative reasons; but the Comanches before him had descended from their stronghold for revenge and plunder; if they were successful they would destroy the settlement and hinder the march of civilization, and the star of empire must not be heeded in its onward course by these savage allies of savage conditions.

Had the Indians all started in flight along the timbered ridge, he would not have fired upon them.

But, though he did not understand the Comanche tongue, he heard the chief shout out a few words, and the result showed what they meant.

Several of the braves whose horses were least broken down at once wheeled away on the trail. The heads of their horses were pointed toward Herders' Ranch.

It could mean but one thing. They were going to warn their comrades not to retreat by the ridge, to bear away to the hills on their left and flank the soldiers.

Rapidly, one, two, three shots rang out from the scout's rifle, followed by as many more.

First one horse went down, then another, and a brave fell from his saddle, though not aimed at, but hit in the rain of bullets.

One brave remained mounted, and he wheeled his horse down the ridge, two of his comrades following on foot.

The fourth lay where he had fallen, a dead Indian.

The others fled after their flying comrades on the ridge, only caring now for escape and wondering what that wild war cry and shots from up in the air could mean.

Was the Great Spirit fighting against them?

"It's lucky I took my horse in the other direction or I would be afoot," muttered the scout.

But others than the Indians saw those shots from mid-air.

They were seen by Dot Driver, the settler messenger and Lieutenant Willis.

"It's Cody up a tree, I'll wager my commission," shouted Lieutenant Willis, and a moment after they had reached the spot whence the Indians had fled.

Having to untie his lasso, Buffalo Bill was still seated on the limb when the soldiers rode up.

"Ho, Cody, is that you?"

"Yes, sir; and it's you, Lieutenant Willis, I am glad to see."

"What are you doing up there?"

"Taking observations, sir."

"There are four hundred and forty Indians on ahead, about fifty just left here, sir, and one is lying yonder in the trail a subject for the undertaker."

"Were you up there when they were here?"

"A short while ago I was sorry to say that I was, sir; but those who were here were the stragglers on broken-down horses, and half were on foot. Your coming set them going, and I chipped in to prevent their going to warn their comrades you were here."

"The main force is retreating from the settlement?"

"You can ambush them here and make a grand victory of it, sir."

"Yes, I'll form my men on foot, the cavalry ready to mount when needed, and here comes my gun now. I have a hundred men, Cody."

Buffalo Bill just then dropped from the tree, and replied, as he stepped to the side of the officer:

"You will need them all, sir."

"I will ride after my horse, sir, if I can get a mount."

"Do so, for the bugler's horse is in about the best condition of all of ours."

Buffalo Bill threw himself upon the bugler's horse and darted away, while Lieutenant Willis dismounted his men as they came up, kept their horses well back over the ridge, and formed his line along the top in the edge of the timber.

When Buffalo Bill returned with his horse he found the troops in position.

"I want you by me, Cody, so remain here," said Lieutenant Willis, who stood near the center of the line, and Buffalo Bill said, simply:

"Yes, sir. They will be upon us in five minutes more."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE RIDE OF DEATH.

The men forgot their hardships of the past few days and stood ready to do battle as the protectors of the settlers.

The Indians were retreating, with their center on the trail, and fighting as they came.

The settlers were pushing the Indians, but not hard, and Buffalo Bill explained that the lieutenant in charge was anxious to give the force from Fort Taos time to come into position before they rushed them.

"How many do you think Balfour has, Cody?"

"I should say all of two hundred men, sir."

"Balfour handles his men well."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it is time to let the Indians know we are here, and Balfour and his men, also. Ready, along the line, men! Fire!"

The word of command having been given the cannon, the infantry rifles, and the carbines of the cavalry flashed forth in a thundering, deadly peal.

With the roar the settlers knew that help was at hand, for they had dreaded the redskins' halt at the ridge.

"Charge!" cried Lieutenant Willis, and the bugler by his side repeated the order in thrilling notes.

Then the cavalry dashed out of the timber, saber in one hand, revolver in the other, and the terrified Indians hesitated no longer.

With wild yells they swerved to the left, as their stragglers had gone, and in mad haste, for they saw that they had a gantlet of death to run, for the settlers were closing in upon them, too.

They did not stop to consider that they still outnumbered the combined force of settlers and soldiers almost two to one; they only thought of flight.

Their ponies were tired, and so were the horses of the soldiers, while the animals ridden by the settlers had had no such hard ride as the others.

But Lieutenant Willis would not recall his men until he felt that horses and riders demanded it.

Then the order was given, and when the day had dawned and the sun was rising.

Out upon the prairie the sun revealed the retreating half-hundred, afoot and mounted, and toward them the fugitives pressed by pursuers crowded.

They reached them, and though the retreat was still kept up, it was not at a rapid pace, for the braves on foot and wounded men and ponies demanded a slower gait.

The settlers were still pursuing, and at their head rode Lieutenants Willis and Balfour, with Buffalo Bill upon one side and Taylor Travis on the other.

Lieutenant Willis had taken the horse of a wounded settler and joined his brother officer, while Buffalo Bill's horse was fresh, as it was the animal loaned him by Jack Tobin.

The soldiers had done their work, their horses were too used up to force further, and they had been ordered back into camp on the stream at the foot of the ridge and to care for the wounded.

CHAPTER LXIX.

ACCUSING THE DEAD.

It had been a ride of death for the Comanches since their retreat began at Herders' Ranch, where they had made a rush, as they had supposed, upon a sleeping settlement, to find suddenly a storm of lead meet them, and over a hundred and fifty gallant defenders dash out upon horseback to give them battle.

But if the Indians had suffered terribly, the soldiers and settlers also had dead and wounded to count, for the fire, at the time of their stampede, had been upon the command of Lieutenant Willis.

Returning to the camp, the settlers found the soldiers busy with the wounded and also preparing breakfast.

The two ambulances that had brought supplies were unloaded and breakfast prepared for all, Jack Tobin and Taylor Travis accompanying Lieutenant Balfour to Lieutenant Willis' mess, where the other officers and Buffalo Bill were also gathered.

Turning over his command of the settlers to Jack Tobin, Lieutenant Balfour said that he would remain in camp with his brother officers until he returned to Herders' Ranch to get his prisoner and start for Fort Summer.

With cheers the settlers rode away after breakfast, carrying their own dead and wounded with them, while the soldiers settled down to a stay in camp until the following day.

Dot Driver had volunteered to carry the news of the victory to Fort Taos, another scout going with Lieutenant Balfour's report to Fort Summer, and they rode on into Herders' Ranch to get fresh horses Jack Tobin would supply them with.

An hour after, well mounted, the untiring Dot returned through camp upon a splendid animal, and, receiving the despatches from Lieutenant Willis, said:

"It's eight o'clock now, sir, and I'll make the ride on this horse by night," and he was off, followed by a cheer from the soldiers.

As there were several soldiers very severely wounded, Lieutenant Willis decided to take them in the ambulances to Herders' Ranch, where there was a good physician.

So, in the afternoon, with Lieutenant Balfour and Buffalo Bill, he accompanied the ambulances on the drive into the Ranch.

Herders' Ranch was ablaze with hilarity, and two-thirds of the citizens were on a spree, celebrating their victory, while the cowboys from the ranches were equally so.

Having seen his wounded soldiers placed safely in the hands of the only doctor in Herders' Ranch, and made as comfortable as possible, Lieutenant Willis went with Burt Balfour and Buffalo Bill to see the prisoner, Sol Nichols, whom Jack Tobin had in irons and locked in a room in his cabin with a special guard over him.

The prisoner was evidently uneasy, and dropped his eyes after a quick glance to

see who his visitors were, when Broadaxe Jack opened the door to admit them.

"Nichols, I have brought Lieutenant Willis to have a talk with you, he being in command of the military forces about here now, and I advise you to make a clean breast of it and say who the others were who aided you," said Lieutenant Balfour.

"I don't know anything to tell, sir, for that money and jewelry was give me by the man Buf'ler Bill kilt."

"He said he had made a big raise, and I was to keep it for him, as I was a honest man, while, if he gambled it, they'd suspect him, and I was ter play and git half I won, while he was ter stand all loses."

"That is the truth, gents, and it's all I know."

"You tell a very plausible story, my man, but you place all guilt upon the head of a man who is dead, whose lips, being sealed forever, cannot deny your charge," said Lieutenant Willis.

"It's the truth, sir, as I tell it to you."

CHAPTER L.

READY TO SELL OUT.

Lieutenant Willis turned to Taylor Travis, the ranchero, who had just then joined them, and asked:

"Do you know this man, Mr. Travis?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I was gambling with him when Lieutenant Balfour and Mr. Cody came up and accused him."

"What is his character here?"

"It was supposed to be fairly good; nothing against him, but as he was certainly cheating me at cards, he cannot be honest."

"And what do you say of him, Mr. Tobin?"

"Well, I never thought he was a down-right scamp, but you found the stolen goods upon him, and that will hang him, if he cannot prove he never robbed the coach."

"I see nothing for you to do, Lieutenant Balfour, but take the man to Fort Summer with you, and Captain Baring may recognize him. I will give you an escort."

"Thank you, but it is hardly necessary, for the coach goes through early in the morning, and I will go by that, but let it be supposed that I go by horseback to-morrow night under escort."

The man's face became livid now, and he muttered:

"That hangs me!"

"I think it will," and Lieutenant Willis turned to go, when Sol Nichols called to Taylor Travis:

"Say, pard, ask the lieutenant if I tell who the men were and how to corral 'em, will he let me go?"

Lieutenant Willis turned at the words, and replied:

"No; you must go to Fort Summer, and General Miles will decide what to do."

"Then I don't hang, if a dozen necks has ter wear hemp neckties," was the savage response of the prisoner, and he was again left alone, Buffalo Bill remarking:

"Once you get him before General Miles, sir, he will confess who his pals are, so his capture may prove most valuable."

"Yes; he is just coward enough to save his neck at the expense of others," said Taylor Travis.

After a pleasant hour spent together, in which his guests found Taylor Travis a most delightful companion, Lieutenant Willis said that he must go back to camp, and Buffalo Bill signified his intention of going with him.

So, bidding good-by to Lieutenant Balfour, Taylor Travis and Jack Tobin, they mounted their horses and departed, Buffalo Bill once more on the back of his faithful Pard.

"Be sure and visit me at my ranch, Mr. Cody, when you are scouting about the country," called out Taylor Travis, and Buffalo Bill promised to do so.

"A most clever gentleman, that ranchero, Cody," said Lieutenant Willis, as the two rode away toward camp.

"Yes, sir, and it seems strange that he should be willing to dwell here alone, with seemingly no one who is his equal by education and birth."

"Yes, that is what surprises me, for Jack Tobin says that he is rich, that he brought by wagon fine furniture, books and a lot of things for his ranch, and once within the cabin you would suppose you were in an elegant city house."

"But here we are at the camp, and if I can I will start early in the morning for the fort."

"Yes, sir."

"And which way will you go, Bill?"

"I am out on a trail, sir, and I shall stick to it, for I wish to find some clew as to the Queen of the Gold Trail who gave me my Death Charm, and through her to the retreat of the outlaws."

"Yes, and that same Death Charm appears to have great merit in it, Bill."

"It would seem so, sir; but I hope to put it to further tests soon," and Lieutenant Willis felt sure that Buffalo Bill had some daring work already blocked out.

CHAPTER LI. THE HALT.

It was not dawn when the coach rolled through Herders' Ranch on the way to Fort Summer.

A halt was made for breakfast and passengers, there being but two to go, Lieutenant Balfour and his prisoner, Sol Nichols, and it was said that there was to be a cavalry escort picked up at the camp as the coach went by.

Only a few were on hand to see the coach come in, and they were painfully unsteady in gait and debauched in looks.

The town was literally "laid out" from the effects of the enthusiasm over the victory of the day before, and Buffalo Bill's health had been drunk so often that he was never expected to have a sick minute all the rest of his life, for all knew that he had saved Herders' Ranch by his warning.

Such was Herders' Ranch when Lem Luby's coach came in from eastward, and halted there half an hour, as has been stated.

Lem Luby's run had before been only to Herders' Ranch, but he had volunteered to add to it the trail on to Fort Summer and back, after the regular driver on that trail had been killed.

This was his first run through since the hold-up, for the stage-coach was a weekly one.

But he knew the trail well, and he was a man without fear, while he could drive anything that had a bit in its mouth.

Away he sailed out of Herders' Ranch, Lieutenant Balfour and his prisoner inside the coach, along with the money and valuables retaken from the robber, and safely stowed away in a grip which the officer had brought with him from Fort Summer, for he had gone to the Ranch by the coach, which had been driven back that far by a scout.

The soldiers' camp at the foot of the ridge was just waking up, as the coach rolled by, for the trail to Summer branched off there to the left.

It was just dawn, but the soldiers gave the lieutenant a cheer, and a halt was made of a few minutes while he got out and had a few minutes' conversation with Lieutenant Willis.

Then Lem Luby drove on, leaving the soldiers to break camp and pull out for Taos.

There was a relay for fresh horses twenty miles out from Herders' Ranch, where two stock tenders dwelt, to care for the stage horses, and as the halt for changing the teams was made, the lieutenant asked if they had seen any suspicious characters on the trail.

"Yes, sir; a horseman went by early this morning, and though I called out to him and asked if he would have breakfast, for I wanted a closer look at him, he paid no attention to me, keeping his face turned away."

"He was alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"We must be on the watch, Luby, for we have a valuable freight, you know."

"Yes, sir; I'll watch close, but I always knows when to pass or throw up my hands, as the man who has the drop on you holds trumps and wins the game."

So on the coach rolled, the trail growing quite rough as it advanced, though after several miles further it was easy going along the summit of the range.

The spot where it had been held up before was passed, and both the lieutenant and Lem Luby breathed more freely as they glanced at the new-made grave by the wayside where the outlaws had buried their comrade whom Captain Baring had shot.

Having passed this point of danger, Lem Luby gave up the idea that there would be a "hold-up," and said, as he leant over and called into the coach window:

"If they knew you was to take the money and their pard back on this run, they heard yer was ter hev' along a party of bluecoats ter chip in ther game when needed, so they was scared off, knowin' they would not hold a full hand."

"I expect you are right, Luby, for I hardly look for trouble now, and—"

"Halt that coach! Hands up all round!"

The words fell like a death knell upon the lieutenant and Lem Luby, while the prisoner shouted out:

"Saved! saved; No gallows for me this time!"

CHAPTER LII. THE HALT ON THE TRAIL.

Lieutenant Burt Balfour was as brave a man as ever wore shoulder-straps, and Lem Luby had never yet been known to flinch before the muzzle of a gun.

But they were both men of sound sense, and no matter what the odds appeared to be, they at first thought of fighting their way through, until sound judgment showed them that their death would be sure, and the prisoner escape and robbery follow after all.

That the road-agents would fire upon even a United States officer was proven by their attack on Captain Baring a short while before.

A second glance over the field showed both Lieutenant Balfour and Lem Luby that they must yield.

There was a rocky ridge upon one side of them, and over this peered the muzzles of no less than five rifles, while the men holding them were shielded by pine bushes.

Upon the other side, thrust out of a thicket, two more rifle muzzles looked threateningly at the officer and the driver, while directly in the trail ahead of the leaders stood two men.

That they were El Cobras a glance revealed, for they were dressed in their snake-like suit, and one of them was without doubt the dreaded chief, Captain Cobra, to judge by his very elegant attire and gold-embroidered sombrero, with a snake of golden scales encircling it.

He wore a short Mexican sword, but carried no rifle, and held a revolver in his hand. His face, as was that of the man with him who was visible, was completely concealed by a mask, only a pair of bright eyes peering through it.

When both Lieutenant Balfour and Lem Luby, realizing how desperate was their situation, were compelled to raise their hands in token of surrender, the outlaw chief, leaving the man still standing at the head of the leaders, walked toward the coach, while the prisoner within eagerly peered out at him.

Glancing behind, Lieutenant Balfour saw that a man also stood there, rifle in hand, and he felt that it would indeed have been sheer madness to resist, but it nearly broke his proud heart to feel that he had to lose his prisoner and the money he had regained.

"Well, Lieutenant Balfour, you are a brave, but a wise man, not to resist, for you see I have seven ambushed men covering you with their rifles, and two more who have orders to shoot you or Lem Luby at any sign of resistance," said the chief.

"You need not talk—act, and let me go on my way, for I suppose you are here to release the prisoner and rob me."

"You are a mind-reader, sir, for that is just what I am here for," and, turning to the prisoner, he continued:

"Come! get out of that, and start on ahead, for we will overtake you. Take

this prisoner in charge, Pedro, and start now," and the last words were addressed in Spanish to the man at the rear of the coach.

The prisoner, for some reason, seemed to hang back now, but a stern command from Captain Cobra caused him to get out of the coach and walk off with the man ordered to go with him.

As they passed around in the front of the horses, they turned into the thicket and disappeared from sight before the chief again spoke.

Then he said:

"Now, Lieutenant Balfour, you happen to have with you considerable money belonging to the Government, and more, a few trinkets that are the property of Captain Baring, while I happen to know that you are fairly well supplied with funds yourself, in addition to which are a watch and chain, a ring and handsome pair of sleeve-buttons, Lem Luby also carrying through some Express matter of value. You see, I am thoroughly well informed."

"You are so well informed that it proves you have a spy in Herders' Ranch."

"Yes; to be successful, I must have spies in every camp. I'll trouble you for the money and articles I have named."

"Descend to earth, please, and you, too, Lem Luby, and I will soon rid you of your valuables and money."

Lieutenant Balfour realized the uselessness of resistance, so dismounted from the coach, the driver following him.

In the officer's grip, which was in the coach, was the money he had gotten from Sol Nichols, and also the jewelry.

All was taken from the satchel, and a call brought a splendid horse trotting to the side of his master.

Upon the superbly-mounted Mexican saddle, and buckled to it, was a pair of large saddle-bags, and into them the property was placed as it was taken.

Then Lieutenant Balfour was robbed as deftly as though the man was a pick-pocket, and next came Lem Luby, who said:

"There goes my three months' pay into your pockets, darn yer! Oh, if I could only lay the weight of my hand upon you!"

"Do so, if you wish it to be the last act of your life, for my men would riddle you with bullets. You carry an Express pouch?"

"Git it, then, for I won't play ag'in' myself."

The chief sprang upon the wheel and took from the box the Express pouch.

With a slash of his knife he opened it and took out the contents, some money, several boxes of jewelry, and a few letters.

These he transferred also to the bags on his saddle, and then looked carefully into the coach to see if he had missed anything, first from one side, then from the other.

Having completed his search, he mounted his horse and said:

"You can drive on now, Luby, and I am much obliged for the very liberal donation I have received to-day."

Hardly had he uttered the last word when there came a shot from back of the trail, and the man standing at the head of the horses dropped dead.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE OUTLAWS' TRAP.

The shot had scarcely been made when the outlaw chief was in full flight, at tremendous speed.

The shots he expected came, for Lieutenant Balfour, who had left his weapons, as ordered, upon the box when he got down, sprang upon the wheel, seized a revolver and fired shot after shot, while Luby had to look to his startled horses.

But the shots were useless, as the chief had a fair start and was well out of range when the officer fired, unheeding Lem Luby's cry:

"Don't do it sir, or some of 'em may kill you."

But from whence had come the shot?

The rapid clatter of hoofs was heard and into view dashed Buffalo Bill.

He was alone, his rifle in hand, and riding like the wind he was in full chase of the flying chief.

"Ho, Cody, who is with you?" cried the lieutenant, with a wave of his cap at sight of the scout.

"No one, sir. I'll catch him!"

"He has robbed us of everything, but be careful, for there are a number of them."

But Buffalo Bill did not hear nor heed the warning, and in an instant was out of sight in pursuit of Captain Cobra.

Having quieted his horses, Lem Luby ran to where the lieutenant was standing, watching the pursued and pursuer.

They could see the chief several hundred yards in advance, driving the spurs into his horse and looking behind him.

They saw Cody using no spur, but seemingly keeping well up with the splendid animal ridden by the outlaw chief.

"Cody will catch him, for he will never give up," shouted Lieutenant Balfour.

"If half I have heard of him is true, sir, he'll do it. So that is Buffalo Bill, is it, sir?"

"Yes, and there goes the outlaw out of sight along the ridge."

"So he does. But, lieutenant, where are the others who chipped in?"

"Ah! I did not see which way any of them went—did you?"

"Yes, sir; one of 'em quit the game, cashed in his chips and passed forever."

"Yes, Cody killed him and there he lies. But the others?"

"They went off like ghosts holding full hands, sir. I'm going to look around."

Lem walked back toward the coach and halted by the dead body of the outlaw.

The driver at once drew off his mask.

"Don't know him, only that he's a Mexican."

"Yes."

"I'll see if he is well heeled."

A search rewarded Lem with a belt of gold, a watch, chain, finger ring and pair of revolvers.

"Not so bad, and a little more than the chief took from me. You won't share, lieutenant, though you is welcome—by Jove, but the winnings belong to Buffalo Bill and not me, for it wasn't my play."

"Keep them, for Cody will never touch a dollar he could get in that way, for I know him; but I mean no reflection on you, Luby."

Lem had hardly pocketed his wealth when the lieutenant called out, excitedly:

"Luby! Look here!"

The driver sprang to his side in an instant, revolver in hand, and the lieutenant was pointing over the ledge, twenty feet away.

"By the great smokey! They have played false cards upon us!" cried Lem Luby, in a tone of utter amazement.

Lieutenant Balfour made no reply, but leaped upon the ledge over which the five rifles were still pointing.

Lem followed him and what they saw made the face of the officer flush, while the driver burst out into a loud laugh and ended with a shout, while he cried:

"We has been played beautiful, sir. But they is real guns!"

"Oh, yes. Five fine rifles, and the two on the other side in the cedars are just like them," and the lieutenant went across the trail, where two more rifles were in position.

It was a most clever device, the seven weapons being all arranged with forked sticks holding them in position, and there was seen indistinctly through the foliage what appeared to be the outline of men, but were really coats and hats only.

"There were three of 'em in the game, anyhow. The chief, one other, who waltzed off with the prisoner, and that one yonder, whose watch and money fits my pocket so fine."

"I'll gamble on them, lieutenant, yes, play my last card that there were three."

"Yes, Luby, three men and seven decoys. We were cleverly taken in; but what is to be done now?"

"We'll give ther stiff there a free ride to the fort, sir, and tell 'em how the game went against us, though I thinks we had

better wait a little as I've an idea that your scout pard is playing to win and may come back."

"Yes, we will wait a while to see if Buffalo Bill returns," answered the lieutenant.

CHAPTER LIV.

BUFFALO BILL'S CHASE.

The body of the outlaw was placed within the coach, the seven rifles were collected and put in also, while a search in the vicinity revealed the horse of the dead man and where three other animals had been hitched, showing that an extra one had been brought for the prisoner, Sol Nichols. The horse was unsaddled and made fast to the rear of the coach.

This done, the lieutenant suggested, as the way was good, that Lem Luby drive a short distance up the ridge, to see if they could discover any trace of Buffalo Bill and the prisoner, who had disappeared at such lightning speed.

When they had disappeared from the sight of the lieutenant and Lem Luby, Buffalo Bill saw that, if not gaining on the horse ahead, he was certainly not losing any.

As they sped along Buffalo Bill saw that his horse was gaining on the other—slowly, very slowly, it was true, yet still he was gaining.

Thus the race continued for half a mile, when Buffalo Bill saw the bright sky ahead.

A vista revealed a precipice not a hundred yards ahead of the flying horseman.

That the chief still held on showed that he knew where he was going, and was aware of some avenue of escape.

Instantly the scout brought his rifle around, leveled it, took quick aim and pulled trigger.

The outlaw's horse gave a bound into the air and fell headlong in his flight, turning a complete somersault and throwing his rider far ahead of him.

The outlaw arose like a man half stunned, turned toward the fallen horse, saw the scout rushing upon him like a hurricane, and, changing his mind, ran rapidly toward the cliff and disappeared.

A moment more and Buffalo Bill drew rein by the side of the dying horse. He dismounted there and ran toward the cliff. There was no trace of the fugitive outlaw.

The cliff was a bold one, and there the ridge ended abruptly, going down like a wall nearly two hundred feet.

Could it be that the outlaw had leaped from the dizzy height into the rapid-flowing stream far below? If so, he must certainly have leaped to his death.

Leaning over, the scout saw the rugged face of the cliff, here and there broken by crevices, but there appeared no spot where a man could get a footing to descend.

"He must have jumped, or he has some means of escape just here which I cannot discover."

"I'll look this place over at another time, and return to the coach and see what damage was done by those fellows."

When Buffalo Bill reached the horse he found him dead. He gazed an instant at the splendid saddle and bridle, and then his eyes fell upon the well-filled leather bags, and out of one was hanging a watch chain.

Quickly he unfastened the cinch and drew the saddle off of the horse, opening the saddle bags when he had done so.

"Well! This is a find! As I live, the fellow had had time to rob the coach before I got there, for here are valuable Express packages, and this is the booty that the prisoner had. I must hurry away and catch the coach to relieve Lieutenant Balfour's mind."

He had ridden but half a mile when he saw the coach approaching along the ridge, and at sight of him Lieutenant Balfour and Lem Luby gave a shout of joy.

CHAPTER LV.

TO TRAIL THE PRISONER.

As Buffalo Bill drew near to the coach, which had come to a halt upon seeing his

approach, a turn in the trail revealed that he had behind him the saddle of the outlaw chief, and Lem Luby made the woods ring with a wild yell of delight.

Cantering up to the coach, the scout said, in his dry way:

"Lost anything, Lieutenant Balfour?"

"Yes, Bill, the fellows robbed us of everything, but you seem to have recovered it."

"I hope so, sir. These pouches are full of wealth."

"How many do you think there were?"

"There were four horses, for I followed their trail."

"There were ten men apparently, but three in reality, and one of those is in the coach, dead, and one you fired upon, a second went off with my prisoner, and the third was the chief, who fleeced us, and whom you have also killed, it seems."

"No, sir, I am not so sure of that, for he disappeared as mysteriously as a ghost after I killed his horse. Whether he went over the cliff to his death, or what became of him, I am unable to say; but I could find no trace of him, sir, and do not understand it any more than I do that you say that there were ten men in the attack on the coach."

"I said apparently ten men, Bill," and Buffalo Bill heard the story of the outlaws' clever deception.

He laughed heartily at the story, and then said:

"Well, sir, I am sorry you lost your prisoner, but as he went off with one man on horseback, perhaps I can overtake him. Now please see if you got back all you lost."

Lem Luby had sat silent all this while, his eyes riveted upon the face of the scout, but now, as though unable to stand it any longer, he cried out, excitedly:

"For God's sake, lieutenant, interdooce me to Buffalo Bill, that I may tell him what I think of him as a partner in a game."

Lieutenant Balfour laughed and replied:

"I beg your pardon, Lem, for neglecting my politeness," and he introduced him to Buffalo Bill.

Down from the box leaped Lem Luby, and grasping the scout's hand, he said earnestly:

"Pard Buffalo Bill, I'm your friend for life, and having taken off of the man whose play you trumped all of his stakes, I asks you to take 'em as a favor to me."

"No, indeed, friend Luby, keep the find. For I never care to take anything I find on a man I have had to kill, and you are more than welcome. Now, please see if you get back all you lost, or if that fellow got away with some of it, after all."

The lieutenant took the things from the saddle-bags, separating what had been taken from him from Lem Luby's, and the Express packages, and then said:

"No; he put all in here, and did not take a thing with him."

"It was life he was wanting just then, you bet, not gold," remarked Lem, while Buffalo Bill rejoined:

"I cannot see what became of him, unless he went over the cliff into the stream, fully two hundred feet below, to sure death, and I cannot believe that he did that."

"I shall look for him another time, but now I will go back and strike the trail of your prisoner."

"Well, Cody, you know how I feel toward you for the many kind services you have rendered me."

"I suppose I should have accepted an escort from McKenny Willis, but then you know I did not wish to call upon Fort Taos for aid; but it was just like you to follow and be of service when you were wanted."

"I left camp before you came along, sir, for somehow I feared you might have trouble."

"I came upon that trail of four horses, and it ran along with the stage trail, gradually approaching it, and so I left my horse and went on ahead to reconnoiter, and saw the chief dismount from his horse, and knew others were there."

"Then I started back to warn you, but missed you, as you went out of the trail,

I saw, on account of a cave in, and so there was nothing for me to do but try and help you out.

"Now I am off, and I'll take that outlaw's horse along, as I may need him, and he is a good animal, while the saddle and bridle he carries I'll replace by the chief's, for I'll claim that outfit as a souvenir."

CHAPTER LXI.

THROWN OFF THE SCENT.

Buffalo Bill, having seen the stage roll away with both the lieutenant and Lem Luby happy once more, though of course the loss of the prisoner was a cause of regret, went at once to the scene of the hold-up, and, dismounting, began to go over the situation thoroughly.

He saw where the men had played their clever deception with the rifles, one of which, a fine weapon, evidently the chief's, he had taken along with him, as he had an extra horse.

When he had scouted well the trail by which the four horses had arrived upon the spot, and knew that there were but three men, he understood that the fourth animal had been brought for the prisoner.

Having made what discoveries he wished to aid him, Buffalo Bill went back to the two horses, and put upon the extra animal all that he could relieve Pard of in the way of weight.

He made a thorough pack of the chief's saddle, and the extra rifle, the camp outfit, his bedding, and all were securely fastened upon it with a lariat.

Then Buffalo Bill mounted Pard and rode away, the extra horse in lead.

About half a mile from the scene of the robbery Buffalo Bill halted, for he saw that the others had halted there, following their trail.

"This is where the outlaw heard my shot, and the shots of Lieutenant Balfour's revolver at the chief, and he was half-tempted to go back, but thought better of it, and concluded to skip along, leaving the chief to take care of himself, while he looked to the safety of his prisoner."

So Buffalo Bill read the halt in the trail, and he, too, went on at a gallop.

Thus nearly a dozen miles were gone over, the canter being kept up, and the scout came to the bed of a large stream.

The other side, however, was a cliff, ranging in height as far as the eye could reach up and down, from sixty to three hundred feet.

Had it been an artificial wall built there, it could not have appeared more inaccessible, for a squirrel could not have scaled it.

Buffalo Bill was at a loss what to do, for the trail he followed led right into the water. When in a quandary as to which way to go, Buffalo Bill always allowed his horse to decide for him.

So he rode back a hundred yards, dropped the reins upon the saddle horn, and said:

"Now, Pard, take your choice."

The horse went straight to the stream, waded in, and turned up the current.

"We go that way, Pard," said Buffalo Bill, and allowing the animals to drink he rode up the stream, keeping in the shallow water to hide his trail in case he, too, should have a pursuer.

A mile was thus gone over, and had Buffalo Bill been riding along the bank instead of in the stream, he would not have seen what he did.

There was a clump of willows growing on a bar that had formed close under the cliff.

To the keen eye of the scout the willows seemed to have been disturbed. He rode toward them, and as he got close he was sure that some animal had passed into them.

Was the outlaw and his prisoner there? Was the former lying in ambush in case he should find the retreat? Buffalo Bill decided to find out before he ventured.

So he took from the other horse a long hickory bow and a bundle of arrows, and, fitting one, he fired it into the willows.

This he repeated until half a dozen arrows had been sent into the thicket, but without results.

He did not wish to fire his revolver, for

the report might betray his presence to some one. So he rode into the willows, revolver in hand.

He saw that there were the tracks of the two horses there which he had been following, and he expected to find them hitched there.

The horses were there, sure enough, but they were dead, and they had no saddles or bridles on. The riders had gone, but where?

The cliff was still as unscalable as before, and the scout was thrown completely off the scent. It was growing late, and there was but one thing for him to do—go into camp. So he found a good place and camped there for the night.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE CLIFF.

Buffalo Bill passed the night without any interruption, and awoke refreshed and ready for work in the morning.

The horses had found a most luxuriant grazing ground, and when the scout awoke at dawn and had his breakfast, they were ready for the day's work.

To try and find some way of scaling the cliff, Buffalo Bill rode along the stream for miles in one direction, and then turned and rode as far in another, without once having found a break in the wall that even a man could climb up, much less a horse.

He remembered then that he had heard of this same stream, with its plain on one side and wall-like bank on the other, running for nearly a day's journey.

But the fact that the outlaw having the prisoner in charge had killed his horses and taken with him their saddles and bridles were proof that there was a way of getting up the cliff known to him.

"I'll give it up now, but have a look at the cliff another time. As I cannot find the prisoner, I will go back and camp to-night near the spot where the chief so mysteriously disappeared," said the scout, and he turned his horses' heads toward the spot where he had last seen Captain Cobra.

It was just before sunset when he reached there, so he set about looking for a camp ground, and at last found a snug retreat down in a canyon.

Here he staked out his horses, after watering them at a tiny stream, had his supper, and then set forth in the darkness on foot to reconnoiter the cliff.

He reached the cliff and began to look about him as well as he could in the darkness. But after an hour's search he found nothing, and so returned to his camp and turned in for the night. But he was up, had breakfast, and was ready for work by daylight.

Again he went on foot, and, driving the coyotes away from their picking the bones of the outlaw chief's horse, he went to work in a studied way to solve the mystery of the disappearance of the fugitive.

He found that the horse was just one hundred yards from the cliff. Where the horse lay the trees were large and scattering.

Nearer the cliff there were scrub oaks, cedars and an occasional pine. In one thicket, not twenty feet from the cliff, and densely thick, was the trunk of a large oak.

What it was attracted the scout's attention to that old trunk, Buffalo Bill did not understand at first.

He began to study more and more, and said, after a while:

"It could not have rotted away in very many years; there is no sign of its having been cut up, and I am just suspicious enough, owing to Captain Cobra's mysterious disappearance just here, to know if the trunk is just what it appears to be."

With this the scout stepped toward the thicket and found that he could make his way through without difficulty, the branches coming readily back into place again.

Reaching the trunk, he saw it was apparently all right; but he gave it a kick and there was a hollow sound.

Walking around it, he suddenly stopped

upon the cliff side, and gave a low whistle. What had caught his observant eye was a line across the tree, like a track of a saw.

It was about five feet and a half from the ground and two feet long.

Then he saw a line like the one that had caught his eye, running up the tree for the distance of three feet.

To find a broken limb projecting about three inches out from the tree was easy work, and pulling it open, Buffalo Bill had the satisfaction of finding that the sawed lines marked out a door in the tree.

When open, the scout saw that it was hung on hinges from within, and that the whole tree was hollowed out most ingeniously.

Within the trunk he beheld the top of a small ladder, and, taking hold of it, he lifted it from its place.

It was four feet long, and placing it against the trunk, the scout ascended to the opening and glanced within.

The open door gave light within, and Buffalo Bill then and there read a wonderful secret, which solved the mystery of the cliff, for the trunk of the tree had been hollowed out elsewhere and brought there.

It was securely fastened by four poles that came up from below, and there was between two of these poles rungs to form a ladder by which one might ascend and descend, for thirty feet down there was a cave, the light penetrating into it from some other opening than the one the scout had found so cleverly.

CHAPTER LXIII.

AN UNDERGROUND RETREAT.

Buffalo Bill was delighted with his discovery, and he gazed at the ingenious entrance to some underground retreat with a great deal of interest.

From without the trunk appeared to grow up out of the ground, for earth and grass were about its roots.

It was in the very midst of a dense thicket, some forty feet in size, but which the eye could penetrate, so no one would have come to enter.

Getting his arms ready for use, Buffalo Bill began the descent of the ladder formed by the poles upholding the trunk.

He drew the door shut after him, and saw that it was a perfect fit, and the height of a tall man from the ground would not have been seen by any one near.

With the light shut off from the door, Buffalo Bill saw that the top of the trunk had been closed, doubtless to prevent a bear or some other animal from making his haunt there.

But there was light from below, so down Buffalo Bill went.

His rifle was swung at his back, and, aiding his descent with one hand, he held in the other his revolver. Down he went, counting his steps.

There were just thirty before his foot touched the solid rock. He found himself in an archway, and, stooping, he went forward a few paces and came out into a cavern.

Had there been any one there, whoever it was would have gotten into trouble. But the cavern was unoccupied by other than the scout himself.

It was some thirty feet in diameter, and ten in height, nature having made in the face of the cliff what at first appeared to the scout to be the handiwork of man.

Narrowing toward the face of the cliff, it looked out of a rock window some six by four feet in size.

The interior of the cavern showed that it was a regular rendezvous, for there were rolls of scrapes, several saddles, bridles, lassoes, and a number of weapons.

Pine straw was along one side, doubtless for bedding, and close to the window-like opening that looked out of the cliff, there were rocks piled up, forming a chimney, from which extended a stove-pipe, that was thrust out when in use to prevent the fire from smoking the cliff, and thus lead to discovery.

Cooking utensils, a lot of provisions

and a leg of venison recently killed were there.

Stepping to the opening, Buffalo Bill looked upward. It was thirty feet to the edge of the cliff above, which overhung the base some distance.

To the stream below was all of two hundred feet.

Beyond was a vast expanse of country, forming a grand view.

"Not a bad retreat, by any means, this."

"And used as a hiding place in time of need."

"It came in mighty handy for Captain Cobra day before yesterday, and he hoped to get here in time to save his booty, turn his horse loose and let it be thought he had gone over the cliff."

"But I crowded him too close, and he just had time to make the tree. How strange that he did not kill me from his hiding place. Was it my Death Charm that protected me again?" And the scout smiled at the thought.

Then he resumed his musing:

"I recall now that Jack Tobin said some rangers had once run the outlaws so close, three of them, that they went over a cliff to their death. I see now that they went down that tree-trap to safety. Well, what shall I do? If I remain here I may bag some game."

"I'll stay to-night, at least, and as Luby comes back with his coach to-morrow, I'll meet him and see what news he has. I hope if any outlaws come here meanwhile they will not be too numerous for comfort."

CHAPTER LIX.

LYING IN WAIT.

Buffalo Bill returned to his camp for dinner, and took with him to the retreat something for his supper, also.

He staked the two horses out, after watering them, with long ropes, and returned to the retreat to find that no one had been there in the couple of hours that he was away.

He did not know that any one would come, but he was going to lie in wait and see.

In another thicket near, where he could command a view of the hollow tree, he spread his blanket and lay down to watch.

Thus several hours passed away, and night came on, but no one appeared.

Eating his supper in darkness and silence, the scout lay down to sleep, conscious that the tread of a horse would awaken him.

The night passed, however, and no one came, but just as he was about to go to his camp for breakfast, he heard the sound of approaching hoofs.

Instantly he was on the alert, his rifle ready, and soon in the early dawn he saw a horseman approaching at a canter.

The man halted near the cliff, hitched his horse to a tree and disappeared in the little thicket that covered the descent to the cavern.

As the horse was hitched by the rein, and not staked out nor unsaddled, Buffalo Bill felt certain that the man's stay would be brief.

It was not yet light enough for him to get a good view of the horseman, but he quickly decided upon his plan of action.

Rising from his blankets, he made his way over to where the horse was.

Fortunately, there was a large tree near—in fact, it was to a limb of this tree the animal was tied, and Buffalo Bill took his stand behind the trunk.

Day soon dawned, and he saw that the horse was a good one, and the saddle and bridle were of the Mexican pattern, while a serape was rolled up behind the cantel, and a rifle hung to the horn, along with a canteen and provision bag.

Buffalo Bill showed no impatience, simply waited with the same calm manner an Indian would have done who took no heed of time.

As there came distinctly to the scout's

nostrils the smell of smoke, Buffalo Bill glanced toward the cliff and saw that smoke was rising over the edge.

"Ah! Cooking his breakfast, is he. I'll join him, though I have not been invited."

Walking to the cliff he leaned over and saw that the stove pipe had been shoved out, and from this the smoke was issuing.

Then the scout walked over to the tree, opened the secret door, took out the short ladder, mounted it and stepped within.

The door was closed behind him, and the odor of broiling bacon and venison steak came to him, along with the appetizing fumes of coffee.

Knowing that the man must be busy with his cooking, forty feet away from the arched way where the ladder descended, Buffalo Bill decided to go down at once.

So he descended the ladder, and from the dark archway beheld his man standing in the broad glare of the daylight streaming in the cavern entrance in the cliff.

The breakfast was bountiful for one man, and about ready, with hoe cake, venison steak, bacon and coffee.

The man he saw was a Mexican, with a face by no means prepossessing. His belt of arms lay near him, and he had thrown aside his sombrero, also. Just as he turned and took his breakfast off the fire, Buffalo Bill glided out of the arched way to within ten feet of him, halting just where the man had laid down his belt of arms and sombrero.

"I'll breakfast with you, pard," said Buffalo Bill, quietly, and a revolver covered the Mexican as he spoke.

There was a yell of terror, a bitter Mexican oath, and the man dropped upon his knees as he beheld the tall form of Buffalo Bill, and the weapon covering him.

"Oh, senor!" was all he could say.

"Hands up, there!"

Up they went.

Taking up one of the many lariats lying around, Buffalo Bill threw a noose over the man's head, and then quickly passed the coils several times around his legs, until he felt he was secure.

Then he felt about him to be sure he had no concealed weapon, and remarked:

"Now, pard, we'll have breakfast, for there is enough for two here."

"Me no care to eat," growled the Mexican.

"Ah! Lost your appetite, have you? Well, I haven't, and I advise you to eat, also, for you have a long journey before you."

"Where go?"

"Herders' Ranch."

"What for?"

"To hang, I guess."

"Me good man—me no do bad."

"Who are you?"

"Poor Mexican man. Me cowboy on ranch."

"What are you doing here?"

"My friend Antonio live here."

"He is like you, then, an outlaw?"

"Oh, no; me good man."

"This is a den of Captain Cobra's, for there are masks and other things enough here to prove it. Come, eat your breakfast, and come with me."

"How you come here?"

"Just as you did," and Buffalo Bill began to eat his breakfast.

The Mexican had only a cup of coffee and that nearly choked him, for he was quivering with fear.

Breakfast over, the scout bound his prisoner's hands and made him go up the ladder ahead of him, he supporting him.

They reached daylight in safety, and, closing the secret door, the scout made his prisoner mount his horse, and he led the animal toward his camp, picking up his blankets as he passed the spot where he had spent the night.

Reaching camp, Buffalo Bill staked the horse out, and then said:

"It will be several hours before the coach comes along, and I will kill time by having a talk with you, so that we may get better acquainted."

CHAPTER LX.

THE SCOUT'S PRISONER.

"Now, my man, I wish to find out just what you know," said Buffalo Bill, lighting his pipe and sitting down near the prisoner.

"Me poor man. Me don't know much."

"Well, I have seen very poor men know enough to teach very rich ones. It is not classical knowledge I expect from you, but good, sound sense, enough to keep your head out of the hangman's noose. If you wish me to say the same thing in Spanish I will do so."

"Me understand."

"Good! With that we can talk business."

"You business man?"

"Yes, just now, for I am buying information—have you any to sell?"

"How much you give?"

"Pard Mexican, your head is very level, and we begin to understand each other, I see. I am hot on the trail of El Cobras, and you are one of the gang—"

"No, no, senor; me good man."

"See here, I am no missionary trying to save your soul, but your neck. You are an outlaw, and as one of the gang you know what I wish to know. You have information I wish to buy, and that is the situation."

"Me not a Cobra."

"You know where their retreat is, you have a mask to wear when needed, and under your leggings and woolen shirt you have their dress, while your snake band to your hat is sticking out of your pocket. Don't trifle with me, or I'll hang you myself."

"What your name?"

"Pardon me for not introducing myself sooner, for I really should not have been so rude. Some call me Buffalo Bill."

The man started, his face turned very pale, and his lips quivered as he looked piteously at the scout, and said:

"You Buffalo Bill, senor?"

"Yes."

"You wear Death Charm?"

"Ah, you know that, do you?" And the scout was interested.

"Yes—there!"

The man pointed to the Death Charm on the breast of the scout.

"How do you know that this is a Death Charm?"

"Me know."

"Another proof that you are an outlaw, if I need another. But come, let us strike a bargain."

"Me understand, senor," and the manner and look of the Mexican was more respectful now, since the scout had given his name.

"You are my prisoner, and you are an outlaw. I intend to take you into Herders' Ranch, where they will hang you before you have time to say your prayers."

"Oh, senor!"

"Now, I offer you your life for the information you can give me about the retreat of Captain Cobra, how many men he has, where the Queen of the Gold Trail can be found, and all else that I wish to know."

"They will kill me, senor."

"Who?"

"The Cobras."

"Well, you appear to be between the devil and the deep sea, for the settlers will kill you if you don't tell."

"Senor is a captain among his people; his word has power. If the senor take poor me to Herders' Ranch, and say don't kill me, they won't do so. If senor take me there El Cobras can't kill me, and when safe at Ranch I will tell senor all, if he take my offer."

"What is your offer?"

"Me poor Mexican man. Me know heap, for me am Cobra meself, me am. Me got little life, but without pesos it worth very little."

"If senor want to know what me know, take me to Herders' Ranch, where Cobra don't see me, don't know, and me tell heap much. He will give me my little life, two horse, fine saddle, bridle, good serape and clothing, get all at Ranch, and one thousand pesos, and let me go away to States—not to Mexico, for Cobras kill me there. What senor say to me?"

Buffalo Bill had expected a larger demand, and, feeling that he could promise the money, out of what would come from the outlaws' booty when taken, or at least take it from the reward on the head of Captain Cobra and each one of his band, he replied:

"I will accept your terms upon one condition."

"Yes, senor."

"I will send you through to the Ranch in Lem Luby's coach, and he will put a bullet through your heart if you play any monkey business with him."

"I will ask him to delay on the trail, so as to get in at night, run you around to the stables, and take you out there, putting you in charge of Broadaxe Jack Tobin to await my return."

"But you are to tell me now how many the band of Cobras number, and where their retreat is, that I may go and reconnoiter, and see if you can be trusted."

"They will kill the senor."

"I will take all chances on that. I know this place of retreat in the cliff, and I know that they have a hiding place somewhere beyond the rocky ridge that borders the stream twenty odd miles from here. I wish to know how to get up that cliff, and to find the retreat."

"It terrible risk for senor."

"I'll take it, and when I have found that you are to be trusted, I will come to Herders' Ranch and fulfill my part of our contract."

"Me tell senor all," was the low reply; "me don't want die; me want live, have gold to spend."

CHAPTER LXI.

TO TEST THE OUTLAW'S WORD.

When Lem Luby came back on the trail, on his way to Herders' Ranch, he had a passenger with him. It was no less a personage than Lieutenant McKenney Willis.

That officer had decided to go on ahead of his command, leaving it to follow by slow marches, and so had arrived late that night at the fort, where he found Colonel Kane still up, and so reported at once to him.

The welcome he received on all sides showed how well his services had been appreciated, and Colonel Kane had said to him:

"You have done really phenomenal work, Willis, for you have fought your battles and planned like a veteran."

"With the aid and advice of Buffalo Bill, sir, and the splendid support of every officer and man of the command," was the modest reply.

"Yes, all have done nobly, and Cody deserves great credit."

"Yes, indeed, sir; for he could handle an army as well as he does his soldiers, and I almost begin to believe in the virtue of the Death Charm he wears, sir."

"It would seem that it had virtues; but let me tell you that few young officers have had the chance that you have to win promotion, and as your captain will be retired, I am very sure you will get the place, and I am glad it will be so."

"Thank you, sir, and I will be glad to have won it; but, Colonel Kane, I saw Balfour, of the —th Infantry, at Herders' Ranch, and he told me that Major Swain is visiting at Fort Summer, and I am very anxious to see him, so I would ask leave for a few days to ride over to give him a call."

"Certainly. When do you wish to go?"

"I desire to start in the morning, sir."

"I'll give you an escort."

"No, thank you, sir; I will only ask for Dot Driver as a guide."

"He will be a good man for you."

"How is Brazos Ben, sir, may I ask?"

"Much better."

"I am glad to hear it, sir. And Sergeant Eckford?"

"He is slowly improving."

Lieutenant Willis had some further talk with the colonel, then went to his quarters, and, sending for Scout Dot, told him to be ready for an early breakfast and ride to Fort Summer in the morning.

This done, he dropped in at the Officers'

Club, where they kept late hours, and had a hilarious greeting.

But he quickly crept away to his quarters and got what rest he could for the morrow's long ride.

He reached Fort Summer in good time, and found Major Swain there, but going to take the early morning stage for Santa Fe.

The two friends had a long talk together, however, and when the major departed for Santa Fe, Lieutenant Willis took Lem Luby's coach for Herders' Ranch.

He wished to see how his wounded men were whom he had left there, try and find Buffalo Bill, and purchase a very fine horse which Jack Tobin had for sale, and he had taken a fancy to.

Lieutenant Balfour had already told at Summer the story of his brother officer's grand victories, so that Lieutenant Willis found himself lionized as soon as he arrived, and promised to spend a day there upon his return from Herders' Ranch, for there was no limit to his leave.

Lieutenant Balfour had also told him of his adventure coming on, and of Cody's rescue of the coach, and McKenney Willis was hoping that they would meet the scout on the way to the Ranch.

So, leaving Dot to await his return at Fort Summer, Lieutenant Willis mounted the box with Lem Luby, and thus it was he happened to be the driver's passenger on the run to Herders' Ranch.

On the way Lem had told the story of the hold-up and rescue, as he knew it, and he was about to say they were very near the spot, when they saw the form of a man step out in the trail ahead of them, and just where Captain Cobra had halted the coach before.

"Hurrah! It is Buffalo Bill!" cried Lieutenant Willis.

"Yes, sir; it's the great scout, as sure as I ever held a trump card. And he's not alone, nuther."

They both now saw Buffalo Bill calmly waiting in the trail, a man sitting down on a rock to one side, and three horses hitched near by.

"He's won another game, sure as four aces takes ther pot," cried Lem, and the lieutenant answered:

"Yes, that man is a prisoner. Can it be the chief?"

"Either him or the fellow that passed as the lieutenant's prisoner."

"We'll soon know."

A few minutes more and Buffalo Bill's voice rang out with:

"Halt! Hands up! By the Rocky Mountains, but it is Lieutenant Willis."

"Yes, Bill, and at your service."

"How did you get here, sir?"

"I flanked around to Summer to see a friend, and caught Luby's coach for Herders' Ranch, hoping to meet you, and wishing to attend to some business in Herders' Ranch. But whom have you there?"

"A Mexican chromo, sir, I am going to have our friend Luby take on to the Ranch and hold for my coming."

"A Cobra?"

"Yes, sir."

"I knowed you had won another game, sir?" said Lem. "You allers holds a full hand and knows just when ter play yer best card."

Buffalo Bill explained that what he had to say must be in strict confidence.

He had found one secret retreat of the outlaws, and had been so fortunate as to capture the prisoner without bloodshed.

Lem Luby was to take him on to Herders' Ranch, going slow so as to arrive at night, and smuggle him into Jack Tobin's cabin, where he was to be held securely until his, Buffalo Bill's, return.

"And where are you going, Bill?" asked the officer.

"Off on a trail of investigation, sir; to see just what confidence I can place in this man's word."

"I am with you, then, for I see that you have an extra horse."

"You can ride the best one, sir, and the chief's saddle; but the risk will be great, sir."

"My life is no more valuable than yours, Cody."

"But I wear a Death Charm, sir," was the smiling reply.

"We will take turns in wearing it, for I go."

Buffalo Bill was really glad to have the officer accompany him, for he knew just what McKenney Willis was.

So the prisoner was brought up and put on the box, Buffalo Bill securing him firmly with a lariat, the buffalo robe drawn up, hiding the fact that he was bound, should any one be met with on the trail.

The coach then rolled away, while Lieutenant Willis mounted the best one of the captured horses and the chief's saddle, the other animal being used for the pack.

When ready, the scout led the way, taking the same trail he had before followed when after the Mexican and Lieutenant Balfour's prisoner, and going to put the story of the outlaw to the test, for Buffalo Bill had drawn a map of the trails he was to follow, and written down carefully all that he had told him.

CHAPTER LXII.

WHAT BUFFALO BILL FOUND.

Lieutenant McKenney Willis, as they rode along, several times expressed his pleasure in being on the trail with Buffalo Bill.

"I tell you, Cody, I am playing in great luck, with a hand full of trumps, as our friend, Lem Luby, would say," he remarked, with a smile.

"Yes, sir, Luby speaks by the card all the time, and it must be funny to hear him for any length of time."

"It is, for he never makes a miss in ringing in some gambling expression. Why, I believe if he were to say his prayers, he'd fetch his card lingo in."

"He certainly would, sir. But, lieutenant, do you know, I think we are playing to win this time?"

"You have faith in your man then?"

"I have faith in him, sir, because he is working to save his neck. I watched him when he got on the box, and he seemed glad to go, and not anxious at seeing us depart, as he would have been had he told me a lie."

"You notice every point, Bill."

"It is necessary, sir, for a man of my trade must. We grow more and more fearful of danger, are each day more suspicious and watchful, until it becomes almost like instinct in us to avoid a trap and to read human nature."

"You are right, and you are a deep student of human nature and scoutology, if I may use the terms, that I know."

"Intuition has saved my life scores of times, sir."

"But you rely upon the Death Charm now?"

"We'll see how the Death Charm works on this trip, sir."

"Well, I hope it will not lose its virtue; but let me tell you that on my way to Taos, I stopped at the grave—your grave, I may say."

"I left it a quarter filled up, sir."

"Yes, and it is again as empty as ever."

"I cannot understand it, sir, unless some one has dug it for a victim yet to be killed—maybe for me," and the scout smiled.

"You have filled it, Bill, and well, too; but there is a mystery to it, certainly."

Thus they talked as they rode on their way until they halted for dinner. Then the scout looked over his map and instructions, given by his prisoner, and said:

"We will branch off here, sir, for I wish to reach the cliffs after nightfall."

"When I was there before I went within a short distance of the spot where we are to go up them, for I remember seeing the peak here described perfectly."

"I have heard these cliffs are impassable for thirty miles or more."

"Yes, sir; but if that outlaw has not lied to me, we will get up all right. You see, here is a place marked which we are to strike, and I have his whistle here, and the signals I am to give with it."

"There is a man kept on the cliff day and night, for he has a camp there, and the outlaws have their stronghold five

miles back, in a little mountain valley, to which there are but two approaches, the Mexican says, and they would never be suspected.

"When driven from this direction, the outlaws go by way of the cliff, and all trace of a trail vanishes there.

"If from the southward, they strike a lot of streams, all of which they can follow the bed of up to a point where they ascend to their retreat by a way that no one would suspect a trail led through."

"But how will we get our horses up the cliff, Bill?"

"It can be done, sir, though I don't think we will need to take them up with us. We will see when we get there."

"And your idea is to reconnoiter the stronghold and its approach, so as to know how to lead a force against it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I first thought of getting Mr. Taylor Travis to raise a force of cowboys for me, but then I did not know that one or more of them might not be secretly a Cobra.

"So I made up my mind to go to the fort and get my own men, with a few soldiers, and as you will know the approaches, you can lead your troopers by one way, and I'll take my scouts by another."

"The very idea, Cody. Now I am interested in knowing how we are going to get up the cliff."

"The Mexican told me that I could go up, horse and all."

"Why did the man in charge of Balfour's prisoner cut the throats of his horses, then?"

"I asked him that, and at first he pretended to know nothing about the man and his prisoner, but I made a sign of putting a rope around my neck, and it freshened his memory, and he told me the man thought that he was pursued, for he heard the shots behind him as he left the coach, and so he hid his horses and cut their throats, as the man at the lift, as he calls what raises and lowers the men, called out that the ropes were badly worn and would not hold the weight of more than the two men."

"That is good argument, surely, but did he tell you anything about the chief?"

"Yes, he said that the chief had arrived that night on foot, and had sent him to the retreat to try and find a Death Charm he wore, and which he had lost."

"Did he find it, Bill?"

"No, sir. I did." And Buffalo Bill handed over a badge similar to the one that had been given to him by the Queen of the Gold Trail.

"Take it, Lieutenant Willis, and wear it, for this is a very hazardous mission we are upon, and it may serve you well," and the scout pinned the badge upon the breast of the lieutenant, who said:

"It ought to bring luck, as you found it."

"Yes, sir, I found it in the cavern retreat, where it had in some way become unfastened and fell from the outlaw's coat, I suppose, unheeded by him.

"Now we will push on and see what is before us," and, mounting their horses, they once more resumed their way, but did not follow the trail as before.

The scout was going by his own reckoning now to strike the cliff about where he wished to.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE SECRET WAY.

It was nearly sunset when the two daring men, each one now wearing a Death Charm pinned upon his breast, came out of a bit of heavy timberland and beheld, far across the plains, the unbroken wall that was the further bank of the stream where Buffalo Bill had lost the trail of the Mexican and the prisoner.

"It is about half a dozen miles to the cliff, sir, and yonder is the peak which I am to be guided by."

"Your reckoning was good, as it always is, Cody; but what are we to do the hour until sunset?"

"Go back to that little creek we passed, sir, a quarter of a mile from here, and have supper."

"It is the very spot, too, to leave our horses if we have to, for I saw a break

in a hill which we could close up by a few poles, and shut them in a small canyon where grass and water are plentiful."

"You are the pilot—I follow," was the lieutenant's answer, and back to the spot they went, where there was indeed a good camping place.

Then they decided that it would be best to put their horses in the little canyon there, and close it up, walking to the cliffs as if, detained over night, they could hide if on foot, where they could not if mounted.

The canyon was an ideal spot for a corral, the entrance being choked up by rocks which had fallen from the cliffs on either side, leaving a space of only about twelve feet to close up. This was quickly done by half a dozen saplings cut down with the scout's hatchet and hauled there.

Unsaddling the horses, they were turned loose to range at will, for to get out was impossible, and grass and water were plentiful for them.

Supper was then prepared, eaten, and the officer and the scout set out on foot, Lieutenant Willis armed with the chief's rifle and the Mexican's belt of arms. They were good pedestrians, if cavalymen, and struck out at a three-mile-an-hour gait.

The scout had studied well his map and instructions, and was not long in finding out just where he was to go, and halted where the cliff jutted out at one place like the prow of a mighty steamer.

"Here we are," he whispered, and, taking a silver whistle from his pocket, he imitated the notes of a whippowill, repeating the shrill call five times.

He waited until he could count one hundred slowly, and then the notes were repeated, this time double the number of before. A minute passed, and the soft, cooing notes of a dove were heard on the cliff above.

Then Buffalo Bill gave two sharp calls upon his whistle, and they were answered like an echo from above.

Looking upward, they saw soon after a dark object descending toward them, and heard a slight rumbling sound.

"Stand from under, sir," said Buffalo Bill, and down at their feet came what appeared to be a large grating six feet square.

It had a solid bottom, and from each of the corners a heavy chain went upward to a large block, and the four were made fast there.

One of the sides of the crate was a gate, and was opened as soon as the fastenings were found, and, getting in with Lieutenant Willis, the scout closed it behind them and then gave another whistle.

In a moment the rumbling noise was heard, the crate left the ground and began to ascend slowly but surely up the side of the cliff.

They saw that a large rope was passing through the block above their heads, and Buffalo Bill whispered:

"My man said this lift was worked by horse power, two horses being hitched to the rope, that passed through several blocks, and going off with it to a distance, where they had been trained to wait; but here we are, so be ready, sir, as there may be more than one man here. Ah! what is that?"

There was a wild shriek, a fierce growl, and the crate came to a halt just as there went by it in a downward flight what appeared to be two men in a deadly grasp.

"My God! what was that?" cried Lieutenant Willis.

"A panther sprang upon the outlaw, sir, who stood near the cliff, and they went over together."

"But how to get out of this midair pen," and Buffalo Bill, glancing upward, saw that the block had come in contact with another block, and a huge crane swung out over the cliff holding them there.

"I'll have to coon it up the cliff, sir," and in a minute he had drawn himself up to the chains, gotten upon the gallows-like arm of the large derrick, or crane, and, crawling out on it to the tree to which it was made fast, slid down to the cliff.

A rope hung from the top of the crane to the cliff, where it was made fast to a

small tree, just where the outlaw had been standing upon whom the panther had made his deadly spring.

Drawing this, the crate came in over the cliff, where it rested, and Lieutenant Willis sprang out with the remark:

"No more ballooning for me, Cody."

Buffalo Bill laughed and replied:

"Now I'll go and find those horses and leave them ready for our going back, for the Mexican told me just how to work it, fastening the rope to a secret strap, and letting them advance, holding back all the way."

"Why, he says they bring up two horses and men at a time in that contrivance, and we can move it, if the man is dead that I expected to force to do it, and I'd rather that he'd die as he did than I be forced to kill him."

"The man and the cougar were crushed to pieces by the fall."

"Yes, sir, and it will cover up our tracks."

"Now to see about the horses and get mounts, for the Mexican told me there were half a dozen good animals kept in the corral here."

The scout walked off on the trail the two work horses had made, and found them patiently awaiting at the end of their rope for their driver's call, and whose call they would never hear again.

Unfastening the rope, Buffalo Bill tied them to a tree near by, and returning to the little cabin on the cliff, found that Lieutenant Willis had found the corral and led out two horses.

These were soon bridled and saddled, and, mounting, they set off on the trail for the stronghold of the outlaws, the scout still following in the course taught him by his Mexican prisoner.

CHAPTER LXIV.

WHAT THEY SAW.

There was no attempt to cover up the trail on the summit of the cliffs, the outlaws feeling sure that they knew the only way of reaching there.

Then, too, Buffalo Bill left the guidance of the way to the horses they rode, which he felt sure had often been there before.

They rode at a canter, for they were anxious to reach the stronghold as soon as possible, find out where it was, note the other approach to it, the one they would have to go to attack with a force, unless they could again reach the cliff by strategy, as they had just done.

When Buffalo Bill came to the thicket, on the right of the trail, which he knew must be where the horses were to be left, they turned in there and hitched the horses, saddled and bridled as they were.

Starting on foot, they saw some distance ahead the glimmer of light, which they knew must come from camp-fires, and thither they wended their way.

A walk of several hundred yards brought them to a sudden halt. They had reached a cliff which went off there sixty feet.

Instantly they dropped down, for just beneath them was a camp, or rather it looked more like a small settlement, for there were a score of cabins grouped about in a small but very beautiful valley.

Just below them, and not a hundred feet away, was a large cabin, built on the old Southern style, of two rooms on a side and an opening between.

Before this cabin, at either side, were two large fires, blazing brightly and illuminating the whole valley.

Not a word was spoken by either Buffalo Bill or the lieutenant—they had eyes and ears only for what was before them. They saw a table out in front of the cabin, and on one side of it sat two persons.

One was the outlaw chief, Captain Cobra, the other the Lady in Velvet, or, as she was called, The Queen of the Gold Trail.

Both the chief and the Queen were completely masked.

Upon one side, to the right of the table, was a bench, upon which sat three men, and they were in irons.

One of them Buffalo Bill recognized as Sol Nichols, Lieutenant Balfour's escaped

prisoner, and the other two were the men who had backed him up in the trouble in the Broadaxe saloon.

It was beyond doubt that the men were being tried for some crime, for grouped about were over a score of men, all in the dress of El Cobras, and they were listening attentively to the words of the masked chief.

The chief had evidently just begun to speak, for he said:

"You have been tried by your comrades, and there is no doubt in my mind of your guilt. Allowed to remain in Herders' Ranch as spies, you used your discoveries to profit yourselves, and not for the good of the entire band, as you had vowed to do.

"You learned that a United States officer was going to Fort Summer, the bearer of a large sum of money, and, not to have the censure fall upon our band, nominally, or really not to bring suspicion upon yourselves, you changed your El Cobra uniform and held the coach up, killing the driver and wounding severely Captain Baring, after which you robbed him.

"Then you returned to Herders' Ranch, and your leader in this treacherous act, keeping all that he had taken from the officer, began to boldly gamble with the very man, Lieutenant Balfour, sent out to capture you, and to play also with others in the saloon.

"But you had an eye upon you that you had reason to fear, and whose deadly aim laid one of you five low when he would have killed the lieutenant.

"Death accounts for him, and three of you have been brought here as prisoners, you, Sol Nichols, rescued from Lieutenant Balfour only for trial before those whom you have betrayed.

"One of you five traitors has escaped, but he may yet be run down, for I know him, Santa Alvada, but too well, and some day he will cross my path.

"But now let me tell you all, warn you, whether you are the camp guard or have your duties elsewhere, that there is one hot on your trail whom you can never shake off, and who is as untiring, fearless and relentless as a bloodhound.

"You have all heard of him, some of you know him—his name is Buffalo Bill. But of him later, for I shall leave camp to-night, and a dozen of you are to accompany me, for I have business calling me away, and now it is for you to pronounce these men guilty or innocent, and I will quickly decide what their punishment shall be, if you decide that they have been traitors.

"Now, what is your verdict, men?"

"Guilty!"

CHAPTER LXV.

ON DANGEROUS GROUND.

Buffalo Bill and Lieutenant Willis had heard every word the chief had spoken, the scout smiling grimly at his reference to him.

At the demand of Captain Cobra for the innocence or guilt of the prisoners, the answer came in a perfect roar from every one present, and the chief at once said:

"That settles it. I shall pronounce their doom, and this trial is ended. Traitors!" and his voice arose in a grating tone, "I sentence you to death.

"You shall have but one short half-hour to live, and then you are to be shot by the three men who draw the red balls from the bag. If you have any last words to say, any prayers to utter, you have just one half-hour in which to do so."

"Come," whispered Buffalo Bill, and he touched Lieutenant Willis, and they silently slipped away.

"The Mexican's directions are so thorough I can come here by the other way with men, if we fail by the cliff, and, as the chief will be leaving soon, we must be looking to our escape, sir."

"Certainly, Bill; but what a pity the chief has an escort, or we could capture him."

"Yes, sir; but we will hope to corral the whole outfit later; but now we know what Sol Nichols was rescued for."

"To kill."

"Yes, sir, and it was done by trial, too. Did you see the Queen?"

"Yes; with her mask on."

"The chief is a Mexican, for you noticed his accent."

"Yes, sir; but here are our horses, and we must ride for it, for we have got to descend by that flying machine, which we are not too familiar with," and, mounting their horses, they rode rapidly back by the trail they had come.

They had gone perhaps half of the distance when they halted, the scout slightly at a loss to know which of two trails to take, and the horse bearing by a way he thought must be wrong.

Dismounting, Buffalo Bill made a search of the ground, lighting a match to do so, and saw the fresh tracks of the horses on their way to the stronghold a short while ago.

"You were wrong, old horse, as I thought, but you doubtless know of a pasture you like on the trail you wished to go.

"Now, lieutenant, this is the way. Ah! hear those shots!"

"They were at the stronghold, Cody, for the wind blows from that direction."

"Yes, sir, it was a volley, as it sounded, and must have been the firing upon the three doomed men."

"That was it, no doubt. But they were given a short half-hour."

"The chief is in a hurry to get away, and we must be the same, sir."

So on they pushed once more, and arrived at the cavern, where the lieutenant unsaddled the horses and put the saddles and bridles where he had found them; then, taking the animals to the command, Buffalo Bill went to see about the team for lowering the lift.

"Get in, lieutenant, and I will lower you, to see if the horses work all right," said the scout.

"No, Cody, I remain with you, for if I go down and you cannot get down, you will be in a bad fix."

"All right, sir, we'll send it down empty first," and Buffalo Bill, having attached the rope to the breast strap of the horses, the two went to the cliff, moving the crate around the crane, and the scout gave the whistle the Mexican had told him the horses understood.

Instantly the two horses began to advance slowly, and the crate went down.

When it reached the bottom, the horses halted.

Two sharp whistles then, the horses having been turned around, and the rope attached to the single tree, caused them to draw it up again.

Then they were again turned about, and the rope hooked on to the breast strap.

Going to the cliff, Buffalo Bill and the lieutenant entered the crate, and with the rope attached to the other side, swung it out into midair. A whistle, and the horses began to move, the crate descending as they came forward.

When the bottom was reached they sprang out, Buffalo Bill gave two whistles, and the crate began to ascend.

"Now, lieutenant, we must make good time," and they set off at a brisk walk, Lieutenant Willis remarking:

"I guess it was the Death Charm that saved us, Bill."

CHAPTER LXVI.

ON SEPARATE TRAILS.

They had not gone very far when they heard a shout back on the cliff.

Their voices distinctly reached them in earnest conversation.

Lights were flashing on the cliff, and, looking back as they pushed on, they saw a light descending.

Then it was visible at the base of the cliff, flashing about.

Next, voices were heard, and Buffalo Bill said:

"They have found the bodies of the man and the cougar."

"Yes."

For some little time they saw lights on the cliff and at its base, and by the time they had covered half the distance to their camp the sound of hoof-falls was heard behind them.

"They are coming right on after us,

sir, so we must run to one side and lie flat down. If they discover us, then we must get in the first shots and have it out."

"Yes; we can do nothing else, Bill," was the officer's quiet rejoinder.

Where the ground was slightly uneven they threw themselves down, and a few minutes after the horsemen appeared in sight, riding at a rapid canter.

"The chief is in a hurry," muttered Lieutenant Willis. "There are just eleven of them, Bill."

"Yes, sir; two of the dozen must have been left behind to look after the dead guard; but we are safe." And the outlaws, in single file, having passed on at a rapid canter, Buffalo Bill and the lieutenant arose from their recumbent position and pressed on once more at a fast walk.

Arriving at their camp, after a little over seven hours' absence, they found their horses safe and were quickly in their blankets and asleep, for they had had a hard day and night of it.

Up early, they were on their way for Fort Taos, having decided to go right there, get a force of soldiers and return and capture the stronghold of the outlaws.

They had ridden as far as the stage trail between Fort Summer and Herders' Ranch, when Lieutenant Willis halted and said:

"See, here, Bill. I am going to Herders' Ranch, and you can go on to Taos."

Buffalo Bill looked surprised, and the lieutenant continued:

"You see I have been thinking it over, and when I at first joined in with you, it was under the influence of the moment, in this desire to run down the outlaws. I will not do so, for you are Chief of Scouts. You came here for this purpose, you have accomplished, I may say, what you were ordered to Taos for, and the duty belongs to you and your men.

"Already, through you in a great measure, I have won honors in these two battles, and shall go to the Ranch, transact what business I have there, leave this horse for you with Jack Tobin, and take the stage back to-morrow to Fort Summer.

"From there I shall take the trail to Taos alone, for it would break Dot Driver's heart not to be with you when you make your attack, and he can meet you and your men at this point, if you wish, for it would not do for you to go to the Ranch if you expect to surprise Captain Cobra and his gang."

Urging was useless; the lieutenant was firm in his determination.

Buffalo Bill even asked that he should come with Dot from Summer, and go with him without any soldiers.

Lieutenant Willis refused, however, saying that if he went along, as a commissioned officer, he would get credit for what he did not deserve, and finding that he was determined, Buffalo Bill arranged to have Dot Driver come to the scene of the hold-up of the coach on the last run, and await there the coming of his scouts and himself.

"You will impress upon Tobin, sir, how very important it is that no one shall see the prisoner I sent him, or know he is there."

"Yes, Bill, I will explain it all, and not even Tobin shall know of your intended raid.

"It will take you until to-morrow noon to get to Taos, and you will doubtless not leave there before the next day, so I may stop at Summer for a couple of days and come back with Luby to Herders' Ranch and join you there, going on to Taos with you."

"I wish you would, sir, for if we capture Captain Cobra and his band, along with the Lady in Velvet, complications may arise where I need your aid as an army officer."

"I will be there, then, to meet you upon your return.

"Good-by, and luck to you, and may your Death Charm still protect you," and Lieutenant Willis shook hands warmly with Buffalo Bill and turned the head of his horse toward Fort Summer.

Buffalo Bill then started across country,

for Fort Taos, calling out to Lieutenant Willis:

"I shall go by the ford, sir, and have another look at the empty grave there."

"Do so, Bill, for I will be anxious to know if it is still ready for an occupant," was the answer, and a moment after the trees hid them from view of each other as they went upon their separate trails.

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE SECRET OF THE GRAVE.

The sun was half an hour high when Buffalo Bill rode into the ford and watered his horses, after which he went up to camp at the grave, where he had made such a desperate fight against the Comanches.

Having staked his horses out, gathered wood to build a fire, spread his blankets and gotten all ready for his supper, he walked over to have a look at the grave.

As he half-suspected he would, he found it cleaned out again. There had been rain since he was last there, but the water had all been bailed out.

But that the scout had half expected, and it did not surprise him. What did was a stake at the head of the grave, upon which was tacked a piece of white bark. Into this bark was cut in neat letters the following:

"WARNING."

"This grave was dug, and is kept in order for the body of a man now alive, one who has committed a wrong for which he shall die.

"Some one constantly disturbs it by filling it in, and hence this warning that it must be left alone, for if the despoiler is found at his work his life shall be the forfeit.

"AN AVENGER."

Buffalo Bill read this with a great deal of interest, and muttered:

"Who can the avenger be that gives this warning?"

"I will again fill it, after I have had my supper."

Buffalo Bill had his supper, allowed his fire to burn low, and again put the log and some dirt into the grave.

Then he took his blankets out of range of the firelight, should it flare up during the night, and spread them about a hundred feet from the grave.

It was two hours before dawn, when Buffalo Bill awoke with a start.

He sat up in his blanket bed and looked about him.

His fire had brightened up, so that he could see an arc of light about him which included the grave.

"By Jove! but I never slept so sound in my life, and I feel that some one has been about here."

He sprang to his feet, and, seizing his rifle, went to see after his horses. They were safe and feeding quietly.

He returned by the grave, and an exclamation broke from his lips as he saw that it had again been visited.

It had been cleaned out as carefully as before, and the "Avenger" had certainly seen him lying back in the shadow.

"My Death Charm appears to have gotten in its fine work again," muttered the scout, and, saddling up, he started on for the fort.

About ten o'clock he arrived, and was greeted with a cheer which he acknowledged in his pleasant way, and as soon as he had left his horses at his quarters, he went to call upon Colonel Kane.

It was two hours before he left headquarters, and then returning to his cabin, he sent for his scouts, and a sergeant of Lieutenant Willis's troop.

"Sergeant, I am going upon a secret expedition, and I do not care to have only my scouts accompany me, as I think it is due the soldiers to be represented also. I asked Lieutenant Willis to go in command, but he declined, as not wishing to take from me what success I may win.

"Colonel Kane, however, has allowed me to take you, a corporal from B troop, and a man from each other troop and company in the garrison, which will give me ten soldiers, besides you two non-commissioned officers, so cavalry, infantry and artillery will be represented, and Surgeon Bannock is to accompany us with a hospital stew-

ard to aid him, for there may be some severe fighting.

"Dot Driver will meet us on the trail and have charge of the fourteen scouts who will also go along, I being in command of the expedition. I shall leave the fort two hours before dawn, so have your men ready to mount at that time, and Commissary Sergeant Dunn and two men will go in charge of the pack animals, six in number, making a total force of thirty-two men, enough for the work in hand."

The sergeant seemed pleased at the prospect of the expedition, and went off to call out the men on his list and prepare for the start.

Buffalo Bill was glad to find out that Brazos Ben was rapidly improving, and paid him a visit, but saw that it hurt the gallant scout that he was not able to go along, too.

"You saved me from being barbecued, Chief Cody, and I do hope I can in some way prove how much I would do for you in return," said Brazos Ben.

From Brazos Ben's cot in the hospital Buffalo Bill went to Sergeant Eckford, and found him slowly regaining strength.

As he was allowed to talk with Eckford, Buffalo Bill told him who Stanley Otis was, his confession of why he had shot him, and of the fortune he was heir to, adding:

"The colonel will give you a long furlough as soon as you are well enough, so you can go East and claim your own, taking steps to secure your discharge from the army, so as to enjoy your fine inheritance.

"But let me say that I deem it your first duty, upon going East, to take steps to show the guilt of that lawyer, and have him arrested and properly punished."

The sergeant was overjoyed at all the scout had told him, and Doctor Bannock said:

"You have helped his recovery far more than medicine and surgery could have done, Cody."

In the evening Buffalo Bill had another talk with Colonel Kane, and then retiring to his cabin, he got what rest he could until the guard called him to get ready for his start.

All were on time to the minute, and, silent as specters, the little command filed out of the fort on the trail of the outlaws they hoped to destroy.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

DISPERSION OF THE EL COBRAS.

Lieutenant McKenney Willis returned to Herders' Ranch with Lem Luby, after a couple of days' stay with his brother officers at Fort Summer.

Jack Tobin gave him his room, which he always reserved for army officers, but had a story to tell him which considerably worried the handsome lieutenant.

Lem Luby also heard the story, and he, too, seemed greatly impressed by it.

What Broadaxe Jack had to tell was that the prisoner had been safely guarded up to the night before, when about midnight all were startled by a shot, and until morning no one could account for it.

Then, in taking his prisoner's breakfast to him, Jack Tobin had found him lying dead on the floor, a bullet wound in the center of his forehead.

There was but one window in the room, and that was boarded up to a foot above a man's head, so the shot could have come from but one place.

The prisoner was still handcuffed, while a chain held him by one foot to a ring in the wall, and there was no weapon for him to have taken his own life with.

So the spot from whence the shot had been fired was a tree standing near the cabin, and from the top branches of which the prisoner, with a light in his room, could have been seen lying in his bunk. That the light had been removed with his supper, and the room thus made dark, showed that the assassin had taken his bearings early, and fired at random later in the evening.

But the random shot had killed the man, doubtless in his sleep.

"I can only await Cody's return," said the lieutenant.

The next morning he was awakened by Jack Tobin, who had yet another surprise for him.

This was a placard which had been pinned upon the door of the Broadaxe saloon during the night.

It was written in a bold hand on jet black paper, and in red ink, while a nest of writhing snakes, in green, was at the head of the notice, which read:

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

"Whereas, certain traitors in the band, El Cobras, rendered it perilous to longer continue their organization at present, as friend from foe cannot be told, we therefore disband, for the present, at least. We are still further urged to this action by the fact that there is upon our trail one whom we have every reason to dread, and particularly so as he bears a charmed life, and can strike where we cannot strike back.

"Step by step he has dogged us down, until, through a traitor's act, he to-night is leading a force against our hitherto-unknown stronghold, but only to find us gone, and only our booty to reward him. But the traitor has suffered for his crime.

"Therefore, we declare El Cobras disbanded until further call from

"CAPTAIN COBRA, Chief.
"EL LEONITA, Queen."

Such was the strange placard which Lieutenant Willis read over twice. He and Jack Tobin had a long talk upon this unexpected move of the outlaws, the officer remarking:

"Buffalo Bill deserves the credit of it. If it had not been for his presence they would not have been driven into the last ditch."

Later in the day Buffalo Bill rode into Herders' Ranch with his men, and half a hundred horses, captured from the outlaws, many of them packed with the booty found in the stronghold.

He explained that in some mysterious way the outlaws got wind of his coming, and had thereupon deserted their camp, in great haste, but abandoning many horses, cattle and booty, which it was impossible for them to carry off.

But, much to Cody's disappointment, everything in the Queen's cabin had been taken, leaving no clew by which to track her.

Thus a complete victory had been won, and the outlaws had scattered to the four winds—a result which was, for the Chief of Scouts, a most gratifying event.

Back to Fort Taos, after a day's halt in Herders' Ranch, went Buffalo Bill and his little band of braves, Lieutenant Willis accompanying them, and as they rode along, side by side, the scout told the officer how he had invaded the outlaw stronghold by the other secret trail, as indicated by the Mexican's map, but only to find there silence and desertion.

The party camped at the ford, and the lieutenant and Buffalo Bill, going to the grave, found it still empty, and the warning placard still there.

Arriving at Fort Taos, the command was greeted with a salute, and Colonel Kane said:

"You can go back to your post in the Northwest, Cody, and tell the officers there that you are just as good a scout and clever fighter down here in the Southwest as you were when you won the record you have, and of which any man might well feel proud."

So back to his post of duty in the far Northwest went Buffalo Bill, still wearing his wonderful talisman of safety and good luck, the beautiful Death Charm, but feeling that it would ever be a source of regret that he had not made a prisoner of Captain Cobra, or been able to solve the mystery of the strange woman whom he called the Lady in Velvet, who, though beautiful and youthful, was known as the fair outlaw, and whose deeds had won for her the name of the Queen of the Gold Trail.

THE END.

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THE POLICE SPECIAL'S DILEMMA.

BY WM. H. MANNING.